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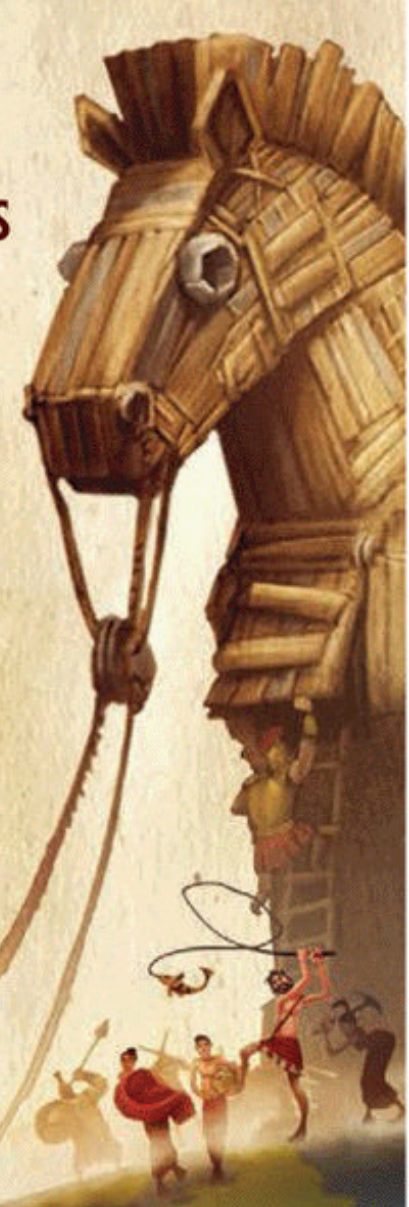
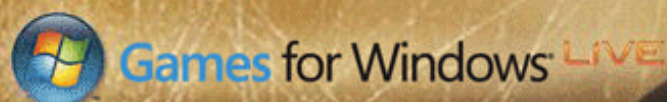
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Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR).

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"Truth be told," I said, "I don't wanna know. But I gotta." The CSI ape nodded. "Well sir, this here human hair? It's from Senator Day Clavis." I choked on a bad puff from my cigarette. "What?" I wheezed. "You kidding me? You're kidding me..." The ape stared right through me, his face as gleeful as a tombstone. "No Detective McGuffin," he said, munching on a random bug. "I never kid."

Game changing



The first PC game I ever played, I had to type in the code by hand. My family's Apple II+ came with a free magazine that published the instructions for games whose complexity made *Pong* seem like the Apollo mission by comparison. Eventually I bought programs that were *typed in for you* and distributed on cassettes sold in Ziploc bags. Then came the 5.25-inch floppy disc, the 3.5-inch floppy, the CD, the DVD, the internet, and finally, Steam Summer Sales.

I'm glad I didn't have to type in the code for *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*

(reviewed on page 68), because it's taking up about 8.25GB on my hard drive, and that's over a million pages of code. So, props to Eidos Montreal, who not only typed in the code for me, but also managed to create a thrilling sequel to one of the best PC games of all time by building upon everything that had made that game great.

We're committed to the same approach here at *PC Gamer*. Instead of ditching what made us great, we're building on it. That's why we've invested in a better-quality print magazine with heftier paper stock beginning with this issue. And, of course, we still give you the 24/7 news at www.pcgamer.com as well as on our Facebook pages and Twitter feeds.

And as I write this, we're on the verge of rolling out a brand new medium, one designed from the ground up to capture all the facets of PC gaming that print media and even the web can't quite grasp. Check out our website, social media destinations, or my personal Twitter feed—@logandecker—for up-to-the-minute news on the launch!

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WHODUNIT



Evan Lahti
Senior Editor
Evan straps on a jetpack for a preview of *Tribes Ascend* on page 32, then spills green blood in *Orcs Must Die* on page 38.



Dan Stapleton
Reviews Editor
Dan puts his underwear outside his pants and hits the streets of *Batman: Arkham City* to tangle with Two Face on page 50.



Chris Comiskey
Managing Editor
Chris gets back to his roots in the review of *Magic: The Gathering—Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012* on page 81.



Josh Augustine
Associate Editor
History's greatest empires were built on tips. On page 24, Josh gives seven things to do when you start *Age of Empires Online*.

PC GAMER (ISSN 1080-4471) is published 13 times a year, monthly plus Holiday issue following December issue by Future US, Inc., 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Phone: (650) 872-1642. Fax: (650) 872-2207. Website: www.futureus.com. Periodicals postage paid in South San Francisco, CA and at additional mailing offices. Newsstand distribution is handled by Time Warner Retail. Basic subscription rates (12 issues) US: Digital \$19.95; Print \$19.95; Digital/Print Combo \$24.95; Canada: Digital \$19.95; Print \$29.95; Print/Digital Combo \$34.95; Foreign: Digital \$19.95; Print \$39.95; Print/Digital Combo \$44.95. Canadian and foreign orders must be prepaid, US funds only. Canadian price includes postage and GST #R128220688. PMA #40612608. Subscriptions do not include newsstand only specials. **POSTMASTER:** Send changes of address to PC Gamer, PO Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Standard Mail enclosed in the following edition: None. Returns: Pitney Bowes, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2, Canada. Future US, Inc. also publishes @Gamer, Crochet Today!, Guitar Aficionado, Guitar World, Knitting Today!, MacLife, Maximum PC, Nintendo Power, The Official Xbox Magazine, PlayStation: The Official Magazine, Revolver, Windows: The Official Magazine, and World of Warcraft Official Magazine. Entire contents copyright 2011, Future US, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited. Future US, Inc. is not affiliated with the companies or products covered in PC Gamer. Reproduction on the Internet of the articles and pictures in this magazine is illegal without the prior written consent of PC Gamer. Products named in the pages of PC Gamer are trademarks of their respective companies. PRODUCED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

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BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY 50

The asylum has spilled into the streets, and the Dark Knight is back to clean it up—but he isn't the only one stalking Arkham's shadows

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A worthy sequel? See our verdict!



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Download a cornucopia of free fun!



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This must-see PC-exclusive shoots first and never stops

SEND



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Your emails, Facebooks, Twitters, and yes, we still get the occasional letter

BACK CHATTER

■ *Terraria* is awesome. I prefer it over *Minecraft*. I can't wait for more bosses and additions. Congrats on the 400,000 sales—I'm sure you'll quadruple that in no time.
Justin Prazen

■ Jennifer Hale's voice totally legitimizes Commander Shepard's character. The male voice actor's so dry.
Bryan Harper

■ I love Marine-KingPrime—his *StarCraft II* games against MMA were pretty epic. Stimmed Maruaders cutting tanks to pieces is always fun to watch.
Alex Chiang

■ *Dawn of War 3*? Shouldn't this be like *Afternoon of War* by now?
Jorden Beatty

■ With F2P games, Steam just got even more amazing.
Charlotte Birse

■ *Star Wars: The Old Republic* is the one game that's going to challenge my refusal to play subscription-based games.
James Lockard

■ I am a proud PC gamer, and I will never buy a *Call of Duty* game ever again.
Rafi Jarjous

■ *CoD:MW3* will win the consoles, but *Battlefield 3* will dominate the PC. PC gamers have fond memories of *BF2* that many console gamers missed out on.
Mike Bare



There's nothing like the aroma of a freshly opened *PC Gamer*.

Nose magic

This may sound odd, but the thing I enjoy most about your magazine isn't the awesome game reviews, or interesting articles, or anticipation-filled previews. It's the scent of the freshly churned pages as I flip them close to my nostrils—sniff! I love the smell of a new book, and I love the aroma of a

just-opened *PC Gamer* magazine—there's nothing like it. People look at me funny on the train, but I don't care, I sniff with pride. Come on, I know you guys do it too—admit it!
John Plomaritis

Take a deep breath, John—just for readers like you, starting this issue we're filling your nostrils with the

intoxicating scent of thicker, higher-quality paper. Enjoy! PCG

Pad rage

Andy Mahood wants an iPad 2 for a touch-screen flight sim controller? Seriously? A Motorola Xoom has a more powerful CPU, expansion ports, and can output 1080p video to your TV. And the iDisplay app that turns it into a touch sensitive add-on-display is \$5 for Android, too. But you'll probably run, frothing at the mouth like the other Sheeple, to buy an iPhone 5 and iPad 3 this fall anyway. Leave your Cult Of Apple fanboy fantasy somewhere else!
Russell Tuss

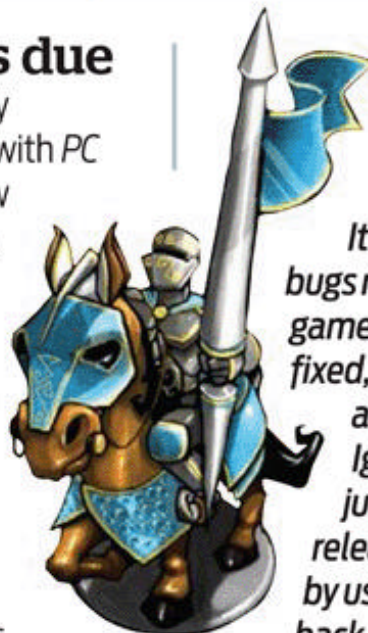
We're pretty much as far from Apple fanboys as you can get, but as long as the iPad plays nice with PC hardware, we've got no beef with it. The Android-powered Xoom is a perfectly valid option, especially for those who like to do a lot of tinkering—but it's pricier. The Xoom starts at \$599, next to the iPad 2's \$499. PCG

THE HOT MAIL

Give a dragon his due



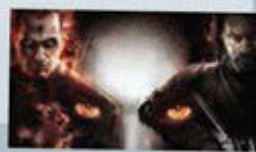
I am extremely disappointed with *PC Gamer's* review of *Hoard* in the August issue. I'm just awestruck in a terrible way that your usually very fair and level-headed magazine trashed a game like this. I concede that it was buggy upon release—at first I couldn't play more than 15 minutes before it crashed—but it was fixed for me with the first major patch a few weeks later. It's still not perfect, but it's way above a 47%. I'd humbly suggest you publish an update



in your next issue to present the current state of things.
Mike Blodgett

It's always a shame when bugs ruin an otherwise promising game, but some bugs never get fixed, so we can't assume they'll all live happily ever after. Ignoring those bugs would just tell game makers that releasing broken games is fine by us—and it isn't. We can't go back and re-review every game with every patch, but we can print letters from gamers like you who want to speak up for a game that's been polished since release. PCG

A great letter deserves a great prize; that's why we're sending Mike a copy of *FEAR 3* in appreciation of his stellar correspondence. Ping us at letters@pcgamer.com with a question, comment, or rage-fueled rant to earn your chance to win next month's **PRIZE OF MYSTERY!**



Hidden treasure

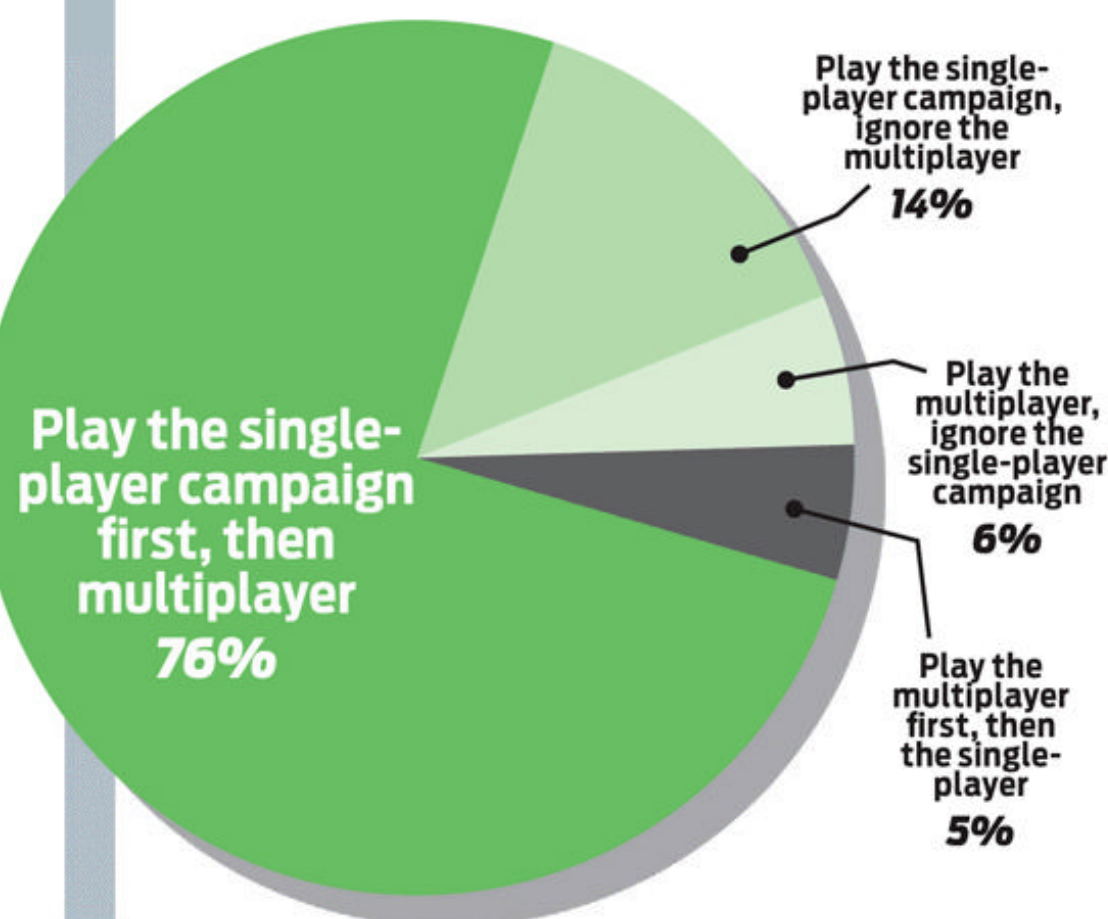
Thanks so much to Desslock for writing about *Drakensang: River of Time* in the July issue. I thought the RPG gameplay from the good old days was dead and gone—I'm glad you showed me it's alive and well, just not on my radar. That's what I like about *PC Gamer*: there are other sources for previews of the next big thing, but *PCG* does a great job of letting me know about hidden gems.
Martin Bishop



Reading *PCG* gives +1 to your old-school RPG stat.

PC GAMER POLL

When you get a game with multiplayer and single-player, how do you play it?



How could you possibly think that?

I'll play about a quarter of the way through single-player to get a feel for the game, then I'll go try out multiplayer. **Jarad Fauchaux**

It really depends on what I'm buying the game for. If it's a game like *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield*, the single-player might as well not even be there. However, there are a lot of games like any *GTA4* or *Gears of War* where I won't touch the multiplayer. **John Hubbs**

I would rather play the multiplayer, because games are more fun with friends. **Forest Bosley**

Games have single-player modes? How do you tell when you're beating other people? **Allan Conn**

I usually only buy the *CoD* games for the single-player, then barely touch the multiplayer. **Casey Morgan**

Personally I play the single-player campaign first, then again, then again, and again (and maybe one more time), before getting into the multiplayer. **Michael Clitheroe**

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www.facebook.com/pcgamer magazine

At what point is a game sequel undeserving of the family name?

Attention: BioWare

I see the MMO subscription model as creating pressure to play, which is pretty much the opposite of what I'm looking for in my gaming entertainment. Thus, I just want BioWare to know that the instant *Star Wars: The Old Republic* becomes subscription-free like *Guild Wars*, they won't be able to take my money fast enough. They might even get me with some micro-transactions, who knows?

Max Ryan

When will there be a new...

Have you guys heard any plans for EA to release *Command & Conquer Generals 2*? With the *Zero Hour* expansion, it was arguably the best RTS ever. Since then, EA has butchered the *C&C* series by releasing one unpolished pile of crap after another. Any chance they're gonna get their act together and make a quality game someday?

Jack Gray

We'd disagree on the notion that *C&C3* and *Red Alert 3* aren't worth playing (you're right about *C&C4*, though), but to answer your question: EA does appear to have the wheels in motion on a new *Command & Conquer* game from a newly formed studio called *Victory Games*. Whether it's a new *Generals* game or an online-style reboot of the *Tiberium* universe, no one knows yet. **PCG**

Will there ever be another true sequel to *SimCity*? *SimCity 4* came out in 1993—has EA just given up on the franchise, since it isn't a massive moneymaker? I would love to see a *SimCity 5* one day. **Daniel Surface**

There's been no life in the *SimCity* franchise since the forgettable *SimCity Societies* in 2007. Sorry to be pessimistic, but we'd bet that if EA does choose to bring it back, it'll be as a competitor to Zynga's *CityVille* Facebook game. *City sims* aren't dead, though—this year saw the release of the pretty-good *Cities in Motion* and *Cities XL 2011*. **PCG**

From another mother

Dungeon Siege III is like the third cousin from the old country who you've never met.



Left: DS2. Right: DS3. See the family resemblance?

It bears no resemblance to its predecessors, and I feel like it should be packaged with paternity test results. It makes me wonder: at what point is a game sequel undeserving of the family name? **Mike Musatow**

Different doesn't mean worse, so in our book, a game becomes undeserving of a good name when it's a crappy game. It'd definitely be easier on nostalgic gamers' emotions, though, if publishers would quit picking up dormant franchises, skinning them, and slapping their lifeless faces on otherwise completely unrelated games. But hey, catchy new names are hard to come up with these days. At least *DS3* remains a fantasy back 'n' slash action-RPG with co-op, so it's got more than a few things in common with the first two *Gas Powered Games*-developed installments. **PCG**

BACK CHATTER

Robin in *Batman: Arkham City* is 38.6 percent less flouncy than expected. **Spatula**

Duke *Nukem Forever* would've been much better without the "tiny Duke jumping from here to here" filler. Other than that, I had no complaints. **Wayne Hudgins**

Just listen to the fans: *DNF* was great, everything Duke *Nukem* needs to be. Duke is what he is, like it or not. **gabrielonuris**

DNF's *Halo*-style weapon system and regenerating health are real let-downs for me. I expected it to be more old-school. **zeroskill**

Some games are better left un-rebooted. **TheVGamer**

You mean accurately high. RT @GreedyRaven: Listening to the @PCGamer podcast where they defend their abnormally high score of *DNF*. **@NO_IRONY**

Hey, how about I whine about *Half-Life 2: Episode 3*? Am I cool now? **Rye**

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MONITOR

THE **PC GAMER** VIEW OF THE WORLD

Physics playground

In our quest to find the best physics effects, no rag-doll corpse, explodable truck, or pile of empty boxes is safe! **by Richard Cobbett**

Many modern games make OK use of physics, but most are really only scratching the surface. Yes, we can knock stuff off ledges, enemies flop down staircases hilariously, and we occasionally even get a bit of cloth fluttering in the wind—but these are just token nods to the mundane things we expect to see every day of our lives. Only *Red Faction: Guerilla* lets us, for instance, cut loose and smash up buildings chunk by chunk until they collapse. Only with a post-release patch did the mighty *Batman: Arkham Asylum* shrug off the limitations of console systems to throw in volumetric smoke, thousands more objects cluttering

up its corridors and set pieces, and other tricks that you may not recognize in the game itself, but certainly miss when they're gone. (Watch *Batman: Arkham Asylum* in all its PhysX glory at <http://bit.ly/YJ4iT> to regret buying a Radeon card.)

Nowadays, our graphics cards can handle much of the physics computing grunt work without those dedicated physics cards of old (which only gave us bigger explosions, not more intricate games).

And there are a lot of fun shenanigans you can get up to in-game these days. First, let's take a look at the two big players powering physics in most games: Havok and PhysX. Then we'll get on to the good stuff you can do right now, like roll bears down mountains.



HAVOK

Backed by Intel (owner); Valve (Source engine)

Launch date 2000

Status Belle of the ball

Can it win?

Not being owned by, or relying on support from, the two big graphics card manufacturers makes it a compelling choice for devs. Its effects aren't quite as flashy as PhysX's tend to be, but everyone at home gets to enjoy what it can do, regardless of who built their videocard. It's a powerful suite of tools, covering everything from cloth to behavior scripting, and is by far the most widely used physics engine.

Featured Games

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, *StarCraft II*, *Red Faction: Guerilla*, *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*, *Assassin's Creed II*

PHYSX

Backed by Nvidia (owner); Epic (Unreal Engine)

Launch date 2005

Status Eating its greens

Can it win?

While Havok focuses on software, PhysX gets its big benefits by tapping into that sweet, sweet GPU core of yours. As a result, the best PhysX effects tend to be optional (while Havok's gets baked into the game's code). Once people get tired of merely knocking over clutter and demand more advanced physics in their games, leveraging hardware power could prove to be a very forward-thinking strategy.

Featured Games

Mafia II, *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, *Metro 2033*, *Unreal Tournament 3*



»14 F2P FTL?



»18 Isengard



»20 GW2

MONITOR

Fun with physics!

Eight awesome experiments you never learned in high school



JUST CAUSE 2

Rumor has it that you'll find a plot somewhere in *Just Cause 2*, but no one's ever looked; we're all too busy playing with the grappling hook. Tie an enemy to an explosive barrel, or a plane, or a car, or just about anything else and enjoy the show! If you can shoot it, it can be your toy.

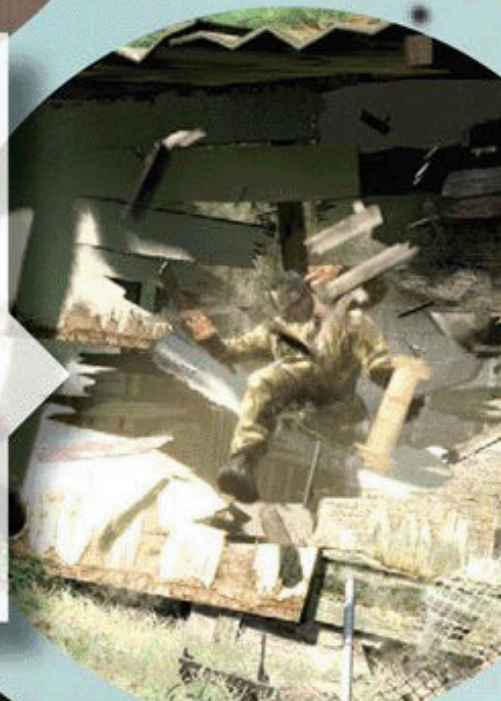


OBLIVION

Here's the sickest thing you can do in Cyrodiil: find a bear cub (or any other cute animal) near the edge of a big hill. Taunt it. As it leaps, hit it with a Paralyze spell and dodge, letting it overshoot you and bounce, frozen but still conscious, all the way down. To lighten the mood, try singing "Roll, roll, roll your bear, gently down a mountain..."

CRYSIS

If you own *Crysis*, you own one of the PC's best physics playgrounds. Find the editor in the game's installation directory—not to create your own islands, but to fill the one you've got with explosive barrels and jeeps. Watch YouTube videos of whole villages being blown away by nukes, tornadoes, and more if you need some inspiration.



FALLOUT 3

Look! Up there in the sky! Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No! It's—what happens when you dump 200 landmines at someone's feet, then shoot one. Man truly *can* fly in the wasteland, just make sure to bring a mop to clean up after he lands. (And if you want to cheat to get those mines, nobody will hold it against you.)



BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

If you have a recent Nvidia GPU, you're getting a lot more for your money than ATI owners when you play the soon-to-be second-best Batman game ever. From tiles breaking to papers swirling, everything looks more complex. But it's in the deranged Scarecrow levels that physics really bring the insanity to life.



TEAM FORTRESS 2

You don't play with physics here: you rely on them. A quick air-blast to knock an enemy off a bridge and into the depths of humiliation/a pit. For best effect, play Pyro: find noobie Soldiers and use your default flamethrower's secondary attack to blast deadly rockets back their faces.

DIRT 3

Drive properly and you'll get to experience the carefully honed physics that make *DIRT* a realistic drive. But that's dull; instead, drive at full speed into a wall and prepare to see the dark side of those mathematics. Blow by blow, the world's most powerful cars become flaming scrap metal—in the best possible way.



RED FACTION: ARMAGEDDON

Meet the Magnet Gun. Here's what you do: shoot a giant structure, shoot an enemy, and stare in awe as the building tears itself apart and *hurls* itself into their face. In Ruin mode, you don't even have enemies, just a pack full of guns and more buildings to destroy than you could ever wish for.



-to-play

(Business Model)

Free or pay? Two major MMO developers defend their different business models **by Jonathan Cooper**



David Reid

Senior Vice President of Publishing for *Rift* at Trion Worlds (monthly subscription only)

Pay-to-play games are held to higher standards; that's the basis of the business model. If you're demanding that someone pay you in order to play, you're going to have to give them something worth paying for. It might not be that way in Asia, but, for the most part, in the Western market it seems that people are expecting P2P to really be AAA-quality. Things that are free-to-play...people are willing to compromise on.

But are [F2P games] more enjoyable? I think it depends on who the player is. The people we're catering to at Trion, and the people who read *PC Gamer*, are core-gaming consumers who are looking for that AAA experience. While F2P provides some fun diversions for a lot of those people, most still gravitate to the big, blockbuster games, and they mostly find them in P2P MMOs.

Someone will likely change that, but it's going to take a big iron-cask stomach to put eight-figures of development cost into a F2P. If somebody goes

out there with a big F2P game with a AAA level of quality, it will totally change everybody's opinion. But when premium games go F2P it's kind of a...last stop before the glue factory.



Aaron Campbell

Producer for *Lord of the Rings: Online* at Turbine (free-to-play with cash shop and optional monthly subscription)

I believe that choice is the future of the genre. Choice can refer to the platform you play on, the social tools you connect with, or the way you purchase the game experience. I think that stigma for free-to-play has been removed with the release of games like *Dungeons & Dragons Online Unlimited* and *LotRO*, which prove that games can be free and still have excellent quality. Nowadays, players expect to have total control over how they consume their entertainment.

In the case of *LotRO*, specifically, providing an option for free-play in addition to a subscription option opened our doors to a huge community of Tolkien and MMO fans who didn't want to invest in a subscription. These players bring new energy to the game, and enrich our community: Middle-earth feels as full now as it did back when *LotRO* originally launched...We've already seen other companies adapt to a hybrid or pure free-to-play model with varying degrees of success. Each game experiments with new options and puts their own twist on the idea. This type of innovation is exactly what the industry needs.



TERRA-FORMING

CAVE QUESTS INDIE ROYALTY
TERRARIA KEEPS EXPANDING

» After selling nearly 500,000 copies in its first month, *Terraria* (70%, September 2011) has received heaps of additional content to satiate its rabid fans. New items like Sunglasses and Jungle Armor let you look good while taking on the new Hardcore Mode's fearsome bosses, such as Skeletron, the Eye of Cthulhu, and the Eater of Worlds. **LS**



CRAFTING CALCULATOR

TF2 MIN-MAX YOUR TF2 BACKPACK

» Hey, hatsmiths—an amazing new resource for *Team Fortress 2* item crafting just launched: the TF2 Crafting Advisor, found at www.tf2crafting.info. Just enter your Steam community ID (no login information is required), and the site reads the contents of your item backpack, then calculates what new items you can produce from what you've got. Advisor told me I could sacrifice some stale Jarate and a few rusty Medic items to craft the Heavy's fearsome, silent Tomislav minigun. Bookmark-worthy. **EL**



NOW PLAYING

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Remember how great it was when you were a little kid and you could stroll into a store and browse through the gigantic boxes housing your favorite PC games? *Duke3D*, *Rayman*, *Unreal Tournament*. Relive those magical memories at www.pcgamer.com/store, where PC games get all the top billing.

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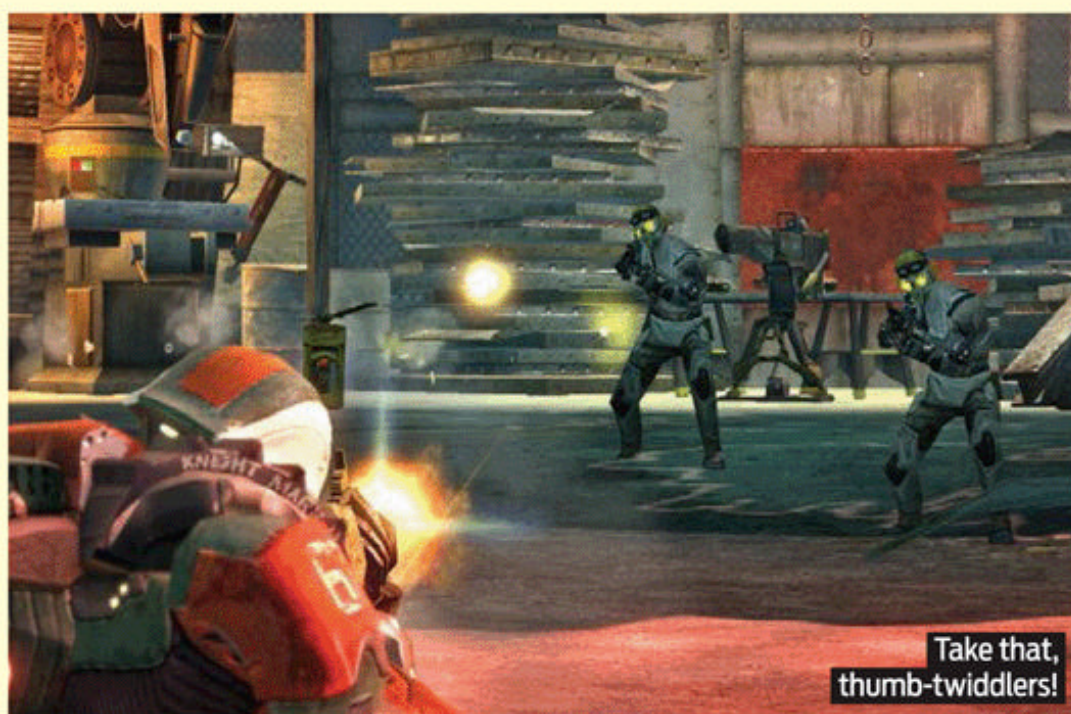
Defiance bridges the platform gap

Best the console-playing heathen in this upcoming first-person action MMO



T Trion Worlds is teaming up with the SyFy channel to bring gamers to new online frontiers. Their upcoming shooter MMO, *Defiance*, puts PC, Xbox 360, and PS3 gamers all under the same roof, on the same servers, to duke it out. It's time to show those gamepad-wielding chumps what a mouse and keyboard can do.

Set to debut alongside the new TV show of the same name, *Defiance* tells the story of a near-future where hostile alien forces have started terraforming San Diego and the Bay Area. Mankind won't take that sitting down—you and fellow soldiers will suit-up in high-tech armor and wield a multitude of weapons, like shotguns and energy swords, to repel the alien invasion and claim back your home turf. The aesthetic of the gear feels like a mix between *Crysis* and *Halo*, with a hint of *Dead Space*. It is an MMO, though, so most of your super-suit functions, such as stealth, decoys,



super-strength, and teleportation, will have to be earned.

With thousands of players battling together in an open world with no loading screens across multiple platforms, *Defiance* could prove to be a giant technical leap forward for the MMO genre. We're crossing our fingers that our version will take advantage of the PC's technical potential—and not be just a quick console port. Trion hasn't yet announced a release date, but we're keeping a close eye on this one. ■ **Lucas Sullivan**

TRENDS

REBOOTING THE CLASSICS

» Reboots are tricky. Sometimes their irreverent money-grubbing murders our beloved childhood memories, and other times they revive a classic franchise for a whole new generation to enjoy. For good and for bad, a lot of classic PC franchises have been making a comeback lately.

Anthony Valva

Tribes: Ascend

1 One of the pioneers in z-axis combat, *Tribes* revolutionized the online shooter by giving us jetpacks in huge, open-landscape maps. With the current oversaturation of *Call of Duty* clones, Hi-Rez's free-to-play resurrection brings the promise of change. Give us a Spinfusor, a jetpack, and some enemies to shoot at and we won't leave our homes for at least two weeks.

Duke Nukem Forever

2 The big man's return in *Duke Nukem Forever* was met with mixed feelings from fans, but Duke's long-coming revival was anxiously anticipated by people who weren't even alive when the first *Duke* was released in 1991. That alone is a testament to the impressive power of Mr. Nukem.



XCOM

3 The original *X-COM* was a strategy gamer's paradise: nothing beats tactical, squad-based alien killin'. 2K is resurrecting the classic's extraterrestrial extermination, though they've taken quite the departure from the first game's slower pace in favor of a first-person perspective and duck-and-cover combat. But fans of the original need not worry—this reboot lets you manage your squad and research alien technology, just like the *X-COM* olden days.

THE SPY



The Spy has won eight gold medals for dumpster diving.

Jakarta, 1973: the Durian conspiracy. Zimbabwe, 1966: the Cathcart affair. Bellevue, yesterday: Valve's dumpster. There are times in The Spy's life when the nested probability calculations in his head arrive at a flat 50/50: intel that neither stinks nor shines, leads that go so far and no further. Kind of like Watergate. Never could figure out if there was anything to that.

In Valve's trash this time: patch notes. Nothing strange there—Newell alone prints 326 pages a day about his current location with his cybernetic inkjet mouth. It's the only company The Spy knows that updates its *bricks*. But this time it wasn't just "Updates to Gabe Newell's location have been released. These updates will be applied when you look at him with your eyes." This time, they were for *DotA 2*.

DotA 2—don't capitalize it, you wouldn't like it when it's capitalized—is Valve's remake of the *Warcraft* mod that invented a genre. The notes appear to detail a series of changes to the internal build of the game, written for the sentient robot-orphans Valve enslaves to test its unreleased games. If true, they reveal the inclusion of an inbuilt live-streaming service called DotaTV, and dozens of beloved playable heroes from the original *DotA*: Razor, Moon Rider, Puck, Pugna, and Oneimmakinguptotracinginformationleaks.

On one hand, the documents are detailed and look authentic enough; on the other, why shouldn't they? *DotA 2* is a remake of a free game with a long history of updates, so it wouldn't be hard to fake a few future ones. Against his years of experience to the contrary, though, and pretty much everything that's ever happened on the

internet, The Spy chooses to believe no one would be weird enough to fabricate this information for no particular gain.

The Spy is adept at reading between the lines. Did you know, for example, that "Please, I'll tell you anything, just give my shoulderblades back!" is actually code for "Kill me now, I'll never talk! I would shrug at your torture attempts if I still had my shoulderblades!" Nor do many of The Spy's interrogation subjects.

So when 2K CEO Strauss Zelnick says, "We don't really talk about it in detail, but you will see future *Duke* IP coming from this company," The Spy knows that he isn't asking for his shoulderblades back. He's saying

A Duke Nukem movie isn't out of the question.

they're going to make more *Duke Nukem* games, despite that, in The Spy's personal opinion, the last one was the most pointless and repellent thing burnt to a DVD since the 1994 Gaddafi/Mowlem sex tape; The Spy spent the last 17 years of his life destroying every copy of.

Zelnick's clever code was in response to a question about *Duke* coming to non-interactive mediums. This means that a.) The Spy has another 17 years of hunting down and obliterating offensive DVDs, and b.) a *Duke Nukem* movie isn't out of the question.

What is out of the question, sadly, is a *Blade Runner* game from Gearbox Software. The unfortunate souls who carried *Duke Nukem*'s coffin for the final stretch to its release were considering a range of other tie-ins for their next game. The Spy obtained what Gearbox referred to as its "dream list" of properties to work with in future games, and later learned that all of them had miraculously been approved. *Blade Runner* was on that list, and Warner Bros. was fine with it.

But not long after Gearbox head honcho Randy Pitchford teased this beautiful dream he crushed it. Pitchford cites something called "money" in his reasoning, whining that such a game would only "sell" 600,000 copies, and that this would "destroy" Gearbox. Man up, Pitchford. The Spy didn't get to where he is today—nor did he manage to so perfectly conceal where he is today—by shying away from completely destroying himself. In fact, The Spy now completely destroys himself before and after every meal, as a safety precaution and palate cleanser.

Wait—The Spy has found a page from Valve's refuse he hadn't noticed before. "Updates to Gabe Newell's location have been released. These updates will be applied when you look at him with your eyes. Major changes include: he is now behind you."

Newell! Drop the crowbar, or I'll put a bullet in your inkjet faster than you can say "ERROR: BULLET IN INKJET." Spy out. ■ *TheSpy*



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Massive Attack



Isengard or Bust!

Thrilling tales and epic tails—**LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE's RISE OF ISENGARD** expansion rocks the lore with intense encounters *by Chris Perry*

I'm always one step behind The Fellowship in *LotRO*. When Frodo and company riled up Moria, I got stuck cleaning up the mess they left behind. Then I took a wrong turn and muddled through Mirkwood while they carried on without me to meet the elves in Lothlórien. *LotRO's* Epic Story is one of the game's greatest assets, letting us interact with the main narrative of the *Lord of the Rings* novels. But occasionally, it feels like we're missing out on the most exciting moments. Not this time! In the upcoming expansion, we're part of the first vanguard arriving at Saruman's keep at Isengard.

Before I could get there (during my recent playthrough of the new expansion zones) I had to navigate my way through the fascinating tribal lands of Dunland. The Dunlending peoples, fleshed out from only the briefest of mentions in Tolkien's work, share one big problem: that creepy Saruman fellow is dumping his experiments-gone-

wrong in their backyard, and his freaky orc/human mutations aren't winning any Best Neighbor awards.

I tried to sneak through the zone, but soon found myself pinned between a huge fortress and a sheer cliff, trying to retreat as an amassing army of corrupted orcs marched on the Dunlending fortress. The area will host a solo battle skirmish for players to return to afterward.

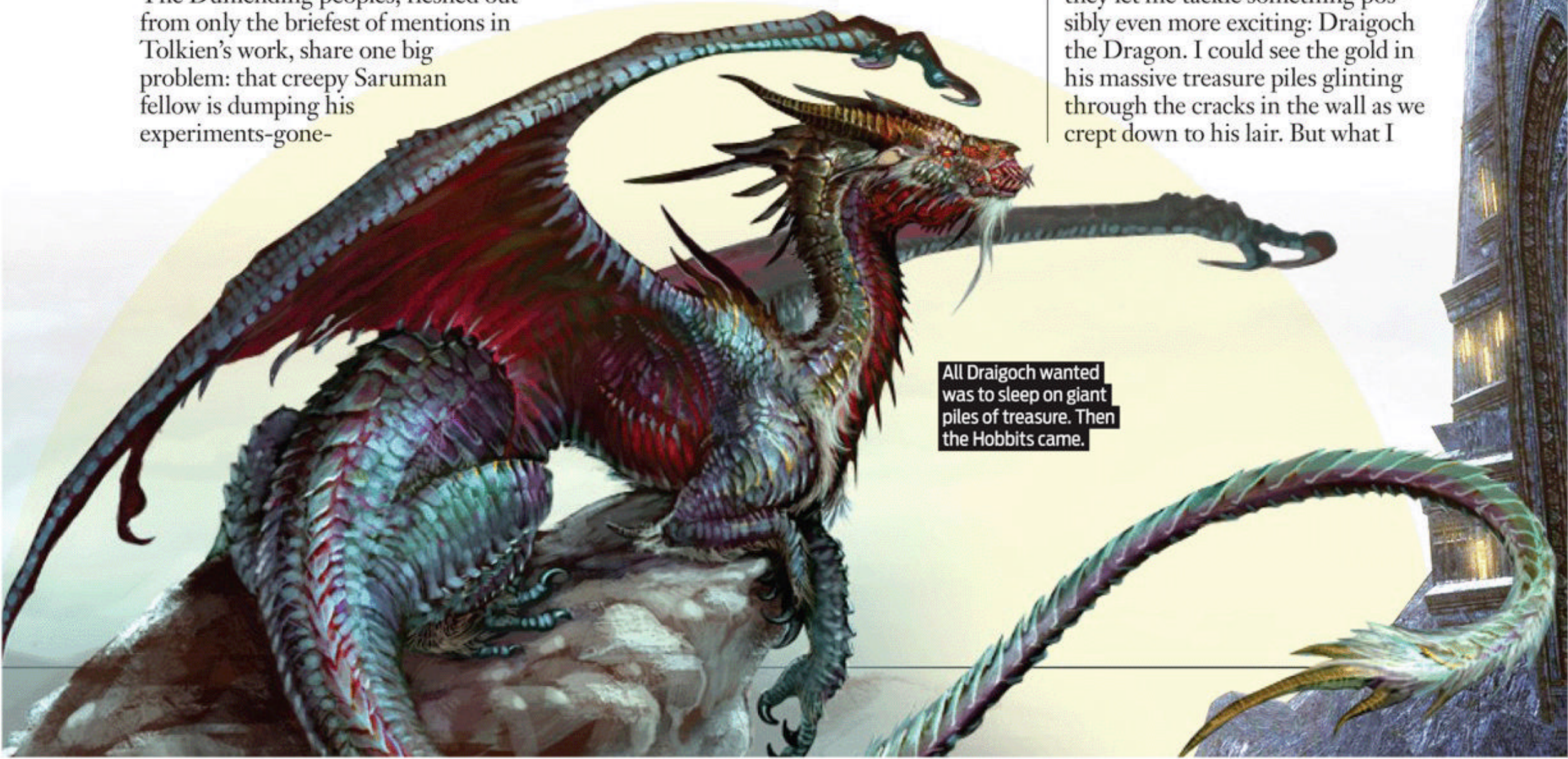
It wasn't easy to stay alive near that many orcs, but Turbine does a good job of reminding you why you're fighting this evil. When I saw Galtrev—the massive settlement of patchwork buildings and makeshift defenses that shows just how hard-pressed these people are—I knew I had to help them.

After I'd done what I could to help, I

pressed on toward the tall shadow in the distance resting between two hills: Orthanc, the black tower of Isengard! The jagged, coal-black spire is the highlight of any sight-seeing tour of Middle-earth, and it hung over the landscape with an appropriately ominous air, leaving only splintered tree trunks and charred earth in its corrupting shadow. I stood for a full minute to take it all in. This is one of the most important locations in Tolkien's entire world, and Turbine's creation fulfilled every expectation I had.

Always be flexible

The developers promised a dramatic meeting with Saruman inside the tower at launch, but weren't ready to show it off just yet. However, they let me tackle something possibly even more exciting: Draigoch the Dragon. I could see the gold in his massive treasure piles glinting through the cracks in the wall as we crept down to his lair. But what I

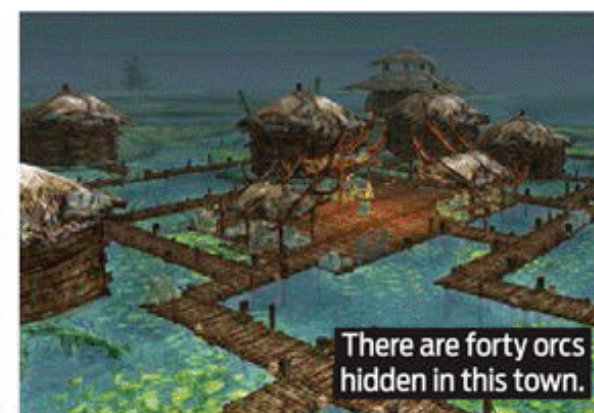




Saruman isn't much of an environmentalist.



They're taking the hobbits to Isengard!



There are forty orcs hidden in this town.

didn't notice was that the light wasn't coming from torches: the dragon had spotted me. I barely missed becoming barbecue as his fiery breath scorched the stone wall in front of me.

I continued down the spiral passageway carefully, timing my movements to avoid his moving gaze; but when I stumbled across a treasure chest on a platform overlooking his lair, I couldn't resist. I reached out and grabbed as much as I could.

Apparently, that's how you start the encounter, because Draigoch immediately reshuffled his incredibly large frame to look me in the eyes before clawing at me.

Dragons aren't easy to kill. The multi-staged fight forced my party and me to alternate between hacking at his appendages as he hung from the cavern wall next to the ledge we stood on, and holding our ground against him on top of the large

heap of coins at the base of the cavern. We finally forced him to the ground with us, where he superheated portions of his coin stashes to burn anyone standing on them and created tornadoes of gold coins (which would've been awesome if they

weren't tearing my flesh off). We've seen these mechanics in other MMOs, but the sense of urgency created by the massive dragon's constantly changing tactics kept me on my toes the whole time.

Saruman's corrupting influence has been slithering out from Isengard since *LotRO* began, and Turbine continues to find great ways for players to contribute to the success of The Fellowship without disturbing the lore. Frodo better say "thanks" this time. ■



Not quite as sexy as *GTA IV*'s lollipop girl.

Differing Opinions

None of the local clans really like Saruman, but they all have different ways of dealing with him

Stag Clan *The pacifists*

Peaceful farmers who have been pushed north by their war-mongering cousins in a fight for resources.

Ox Clan *The turncoats*

Warriors whose unfettered greed are causing them to fall under Saruman's influence.

Boar Clan *The guerrillas*

Almost extinct, the few remaining members of this clan fight back from the shadows against the power of Orthanc.

Falcon Clan *The warriors*

Steadfast do-gooders openly battling against Saruman's minions to keep his power at bay.

Dragon Clan *The outcasts*

Hermits of the Dunlending clans, they've grown too savage and fierce to interact with their nearby kin.

Engineering Solutions

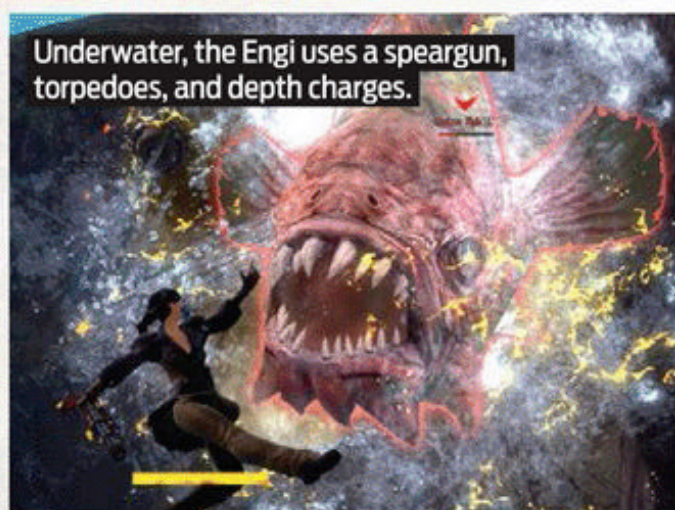
We grab our turrets and explosives, and take on **GUILD WARS 2**'s dungeons as the gun-toting Engineer profession *by Josh Augustine*

I claim this land in the name of *PC Gamer*!" With 15 mines, four Rifle Turrets, three Healing Turrets, and four Engineers armed to the teeth with flamethrowers and explosives standing in a close circle around it, I dared anyone to try to take it from us.

Then a ghost cast fear on our entire group, forcing our characters to run off the edge of the nearby cliff and plummet into the poisoned water below.

That humbling experience was just one of many deaths during my recent trip to ArenaNet's Seattle office, where I was a part of the first outside group to play the Ascalon Catacombs dungeon on both Story and Explorable modes. We tackled Story mode first, since it's the easier of the two, it's designed to be accessible and tell the game's lore with beautiful cutscenes.

My group—four Engineers and one Thief—was a fairly odd combination, and we had some difficulties early on as we tried to take down the cursed souls of Ascalon's former inhabitants that haunt the dungeon's winding underground catacombs.



Perilous spelunking

Four things I learned about Explorable mode while dying repeatedly in it:

1. IT'S NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART

We're talking heroic-level difficulty, designed for coordinated groups working together on voice chat.

2. IT'S DIFFERENT

Set in the aftermath of the events in Story mode, this repeatable version of the dungeon has completely different objectives, enemies, bosses, and story.

3. YOU CAN CHANGE IT

We ran into a camp of three NPCs who each had a different plan to get at the treasures inside. Our group voted to let the Asari rip our souls from our bodies (probably not the wisest choice in hindsight), which set us down one of three entirely separate and unique wings of the dungeon.

4. I'M NOT A GOOD ARTIST

Being able to draw on the minimap to coordinate your group before and during battle is awesome. Especially when we had to defend two soul-sucking machines on opposite sides of a large cave against marauding reptiles that emerged from burrows popping up all over the room. And while it's tempting to draw smiley faces mid-fight, I learned that doing so will get you yelled at by your teammates.



A better way

It didn't take long for me to appreciate the Engineer: the class is about claiming a bit of land and holding the line until your dying breath. When played properly, I could use the many turrets and explosives at my disposal to establish a forward base of operations for my group—not unlike the *Team Fortress 2* class of the same name.

Instead of shooting the place up like Rambo, I focused my attention on keeping my massive, mechanical war machine running smoothly. I had three turrets—Healing, Rifle, and Thumper (which periodically generates a mini-earthquake to damage all enemies near it)—running at all time, electrical shields to protect allies, and explosives guarding our perimeter.

The Engineer's explosives (mines, bombs, and grenades), along with heal packs and a flamethrower, are accessed via Kits: utility skills that replace your action bar with a complete set of abilities themed to that weapon. For example, activating the grenade Kit gave me a variety of grenades that stun, slow, light things on fire, or just explode the good ol' fashioned way.

Always be flexible

All of that's on top of your basic weapon attacks.

Engineers can equip a rifle, two pistols, or a pistol and shield combo, which each allow you a slew of damaging and movement-affecting moves. My personal favorites are the Rifle Rocket-jump that launches you in any direction, the Overcharge Shot that blasts you and your enemy in opposite directions, and the Shield Skill that creates a giant energy wall that reflects projectiles.

It's amazing how versatile my role in the group could be. When we took on the ghost of a lieutenant and 10 of his spirited followers, I threw down turrets and land mines beforehand. Then I switched over to grenades to attract the pack of lower-level guards, and used my Slick Shoes ability to slow them down with oil puddles as they chased me to our makeshift turret bunker. When they got close, I detonated my land mines to finish 'em off.

By then, a couple of my teammates were taking a beating from the boss, so I activated my bullet-reflecting wall in front of them and donned my Healing Kit to throw medpacks at their feet to help keep them alive. I felt like the star of the show, and I hadn't even fired my weapon once.

Most of the other encounters in the Story mode required the usual MMO dungeon tricks: don't stand in red circles, stop attacking when they're reflecting your damage type, keep the two bosses across the room from each other, etc. It's a solid design that keeps the emphasis on learning how to combine your individual character's unique strengths and weaknesses to succeed as a group, not memorizing complex boss mechanics. And that's definitely a good thing. ■



No fancy spell-casting or nimble dancing here—Engineers'd rather just blow the enemy to bits.



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MYRMIDON

IT'S BETTER DOWN WHERE IT'S
WETTER, JUDGING BY THIS AQUATIC BEAST

There's something about a sharkman wielding a golden trident that makes me want to go on a killing spree.

Heroes of Newerth's Myrmidon has been my favorite hero of late, mostly because of his flexibility as a long-range support caster and burst melee DPSer. Every time I activate his Forced Evolution ultimate—which transforms him from a slender fish-dude into a gargantuan monster with tentacles and a hulking cleaver for an arm—I get a maniacal smile on my face. He's like a freaky reject of the *Street Sharks* cast.

Myrmidon's all about the alley-oop; I'm setting up my teammates for hero-kill slam dunks left and right. I line the enemies up with the Weed Field ability, which tangles 'em up in a bed of seaweed, then I use my magical carp friend to gauge the enemy's skill level. Pros will stand still right before it hits them (the fish stuns moving targets), but I chuckle every time a new player frantically and unsuccessfully tries to avoid the homing stun-fish, as I once did. After I start swimming in kills in the mid-game as this oceanic menace, I can do some slam-dunk ganking of my own; and it's GG. ■ **Lucas Sullivan**

MOBA
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Vorp Speed

MOBAs make the jump to deep space

It's hard to find a quality browser-based game, let alone one you can play while surfing Facebook. But here's one worth your time: END Games' unique MOBA-style space shooter, *Vorp*. *Asteroids* meets *DotA* in this top-down sci-fi strategy shooter, complete with three lanes of chaotic space carnage.

Gameplay is fast and surprisingly deep—all your favorite MOBA tactics apply here, like ganking and pushing turrets at the right times. Best of all, experience points drop



as chunks of crystal, so you can snatch up the XP from a slain ally before your enemies grab it. Go to www.vorp.endgames.net, and you'll be smokin' space yuppies in no time. ■ **Lucas Sullivan**



Commander Gideon, Iron Wolf

Favorite food: Steak and Potatoes
Playstyle: Risky: sacrifice your health to fire your devastating Alpha Cannon, and rely on creating immobile shields to keep you safe.



Bolt Vanderhug, SS Venture

Favorite food: Orion Muffins
Playstyle: Sleight of hand: refill energy pools with your Revaporator, and trick enemies into collecting bombs disguised as health packs.

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Secrets to a successful civilization

Be ready to dominate **AGE OF EMPIRES ONLINE** the second it launches this month

I don't know when you, specifically, will be reading this. If August 16 is still in the future, breathe a sigh of relief and start memorizing the seven tips below—you have time before *Age of Empires Online* launches. If it's after August 16, you should immediately panic. You missed the launch date and everyone's already more powerful than you. Now stop panicking. You can catch up. Dan and I put a ton of hours into the beta, and we're going to share our wisdom with you so you can avoid repeating our mistakes and rise straight to the top with your new civilization. *AoE* fans pay special attention: this latest installment mimics *AoE2*'s combat, but there are a lot of added features you need to learn. **Josh Augustine**

1. Don't give your peons lunch breaks

Your persistent Capital City isn't just for looks; it's the portal to all of your civilization customization options and a 24/7 crafting hub. Purchase blueprints for crafting buildings at the Construction Store, and place them in a tight huddle somewhere. Stop by every day or two to collect the fine resources your subjects are constantly producing for you (at no cost).



2. Consume wisely

Your civ can specialize in two of the game's seven crafting lines, which cover the basic elements like Infantry, Construction, and Religion. Your choice allows you to craft consumables themed to that specialty. For example, Dan's choice of Construction lets him create deployable Bandit Towers to scout the map and summon cows for the slaughter. (Balance assurance: consumables can't be used in PvP.)

3. Leave no one standing

Crafting'll fill up your inventory, but it isn't going to strike terror into the hearts of your enemies. Earn their cowardly tribute by thoroughly demolishing every foe on every map. In particular, be sure to ambush the Bandit Camps hidden off the beaten path. Kill the guards and ransack their campsite for those oh-so-delightful spoils of war.



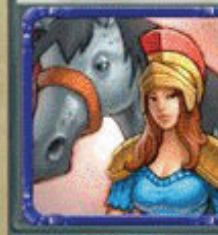
4. Farm till your fingers bleed

Don't worry, this isn't FarmVille. This series of quests is a skill challenge that demands the utmost efficiency in build order and resource micro. First, you're asked to build 10 farms in 10 minutes. Piece of cake. Then, in nine minutes. Eight minutes. Five minutes, are you kidding me?! I lost by seconds countless times, but the reward is worth it: an epic hammer that increases all your villagers' actions and plenty of good ol' fashioned pride.



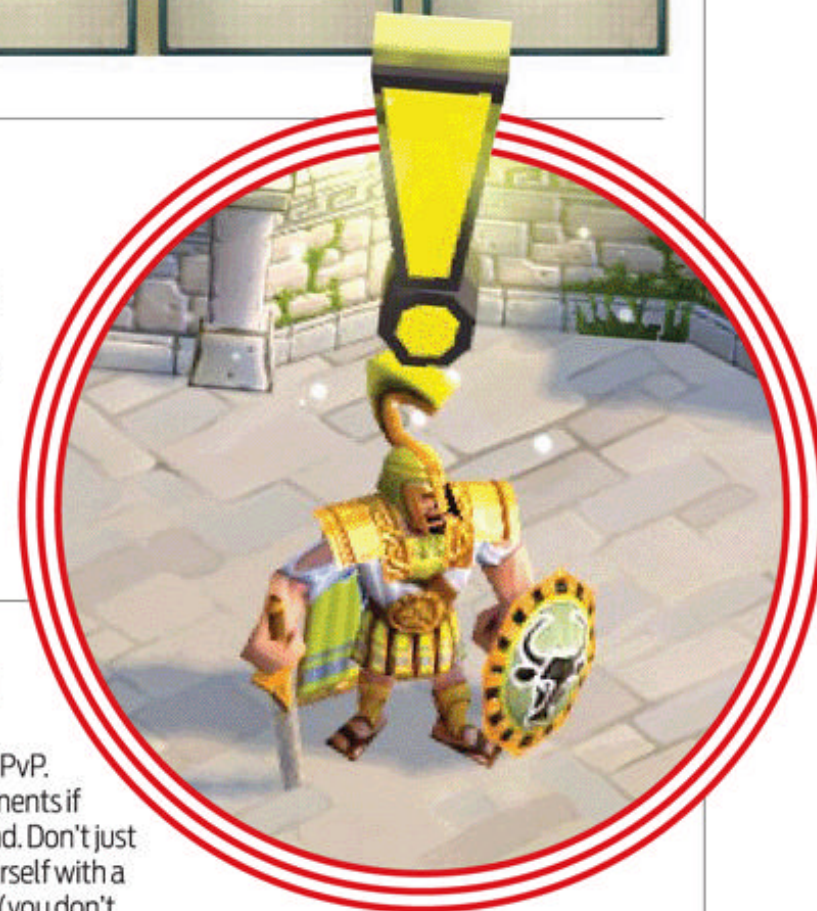
5. Be advised

Don't think of it as slavery. Sure, you buy and sell innocent people on the open market and force them to work for you with no compensation; but we call them Advisors, so it's OK. You can have four Advisors active at any time (one for each Age); they can be equipped to provide specific bonuses which become active as you advance through the Ages (bonuses such as self-healing for your infantry units, or faster villager movement).

Net Maker Aapep	Miner Kleon	General Heron	Infantry Sergeant Herakleides
			
Villagers gather food 6% faster from fish, berry bushes, and huntable animals.	Villagers gather 6% more gold from Gold Mines.	Cavalry units see 40% farther.	Infantry units train 6% faster.

6. Bring a friend

Some missions require you to go solo, but many let you bring along another player as backup. If none of your personal friends are online and you're stuck on a tough mission, find a skilled, high-level player in the chat channels to help you out. ▶



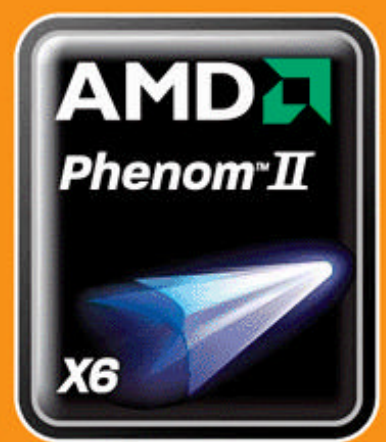
7. Kill a friend

At launch, automated matchmaking only works for 1v1 PvP. You have to manually find opponents if you want to play 2v2 with a friend. Don't just befriend the pros—acquaint yourself with a few only-decent players as well (you don't want those ringers you bring in for assistance in co-op spoiling your PvP fun). ▼



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Richard "Powertool" Carrillo is a senior game designer at THQ. His Facebook profile picture will be of him with Shannon Elizabeth at the Playboy Mansion until the day he dies.

My biggest passion in gaming lies in multiplayer experiences. There is no greater joy than to know that gamers 1,000 miles away are screaming at their monitors because of what I just did to them. So when a new first-person shooter releases, I'm excited to unwrap my copy and jump straight into MP. Yet after logging about five hours of Team Death Match in a recent blockbuster, a strange thing started happening: before I knew it, the end-of-match screen popped up with the scoreboard, and even though my name was sitting at the top, I had no recollection of how long that match had lasted. I sat there, bored, and realized that there'd been zero memorable moments.

I put in a few more hours of game time, but as I played I felt myself going through the motions without any real emotion or thought. I was mentally spacing out, following the same routes in a zombie-like state. It's like driving home from work and reaching your destination without realizing how long you'd been driving. That scenario is in no way a testament to your driving skills, but more about how routine that experience has become.

Anti-zombification

Challenging gamers and keeping their interest is becoming a harder and harder task for developers. This is especially true in the FPS genre, where most games have similar gameplay, modes, and features. Like me, players will establish the same rhythms until they start mentally tuning out. The industry's solution to this issue has been more modes, more maps, and more weapons. Is the future of the FPS to pack hundreds of each into a shipped game, and then add more in DLC?

New content may get the job done, but only for a limited time, and at a high cost. So how do we, as designers, develop experiences that continuously challenge our players without tons of new content? How do we postpone gamer zombification? A new game mode

can offer new challenges, but developers have been creating new and unique game modes for years, yet nothing has been able to topple the appeal of standard Team Death Match. Do you log online to pick up a box, to run from A to B, or to get headshots? For most gamers it's the latter, and TDM still best promotes the core experience that makes FPS so much fun: killing other players. The issue comes when you are several hours in and the process of spawn, kill, die, and repeat just isn't cutting it. So how do we keep TDM from becoming stale?

Climbing the mountain

We ran into this exact question while developing the Battle Commander mode for *Homefront*. Our early prototypes created dynamic missions that randomly asked players to capture zones or pick up boxes. But it wasn't long before players ignored these side-objectives completely, and instead continued to simply kill each other.

Do you log online to pick up a box, or to get headshots?

At that point we did the best thing we could: we let them have the TDM experience they wanted and built dynamic missions around it. We gave individual players more power if they performed well, and others were tasked to take them out. These new missions gave every spawn extra purpose: either start your own progression or knock an enemy off of his. Players could now escalate into the biggest threat, control the match, and be hunted by every opposing player. In buzz-word terms, we called this "dynamic escalation."

While I don't wish for every FPS to grow players into mini-bosses, and I don't think that our specific example is the sole future of the genre, I *do* believe the future of FPS is a mountain climb instead of the current roller coaster. As players kill each other, the match's intensity should increase and offer new challenges. The enjoyment should be in the escalation

instead of waiting for bursts of excitement, and the experience should be driven by the players instead of riding a one-way track.

As developers, we need to challenge players each time their virtual feet hit the field. To do this, we need the players to drive the match. These new challenges should be player-controlled to offer dynamic and unique experiences. We need them to *become* the mechanic instead of simply using one. Because once players become zombies, they're lost forever. ■



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IN SIMULATION



Andy Mahood has been barnstorming his spare hours this month with *Rise of Flight*, *DCS A-10C Warthog*, *IL-2 Sturmovik*, *Cliffs of Dover*, *iRacing*, and *DiRT 3*. Email him at insimulation@pcgamer.com.

After a circuitous flight over the picturesque French countryside, my squadron of Breguet 14.B2 bombers finally reached the muddy, trench-laden front lines. It didn't take long to transit this livid, brown scar on the landscape and reach our mission objective: a German airfield near St. Quentin. The Huns scrambled some Albatros D.Va's to scare us off, but my handlebar-mustachioed tail-gunner (I call him Jean-Pierre) made short work of them with his twin Lewis machine guns. Minutes later, I dropped my 250-kilogram bombload down the chimney of one of the main buildings and banked off southwest for the flight home, grinning from ear to ear.

That's the essence of the gameplay in *Rise of Flight: The First Great Air War*, the preeminent WWI flight sim on today's market. It's been at or near the top of my playlist since its 2009 release, but it wasn't until the following year, when US publisher 777 Studios purchased *RoF* and its Russian developers (previously known as II-2SC GT), that it really found its wings. Under the direction of 777 Studios, the Moscow-based development team has produced numerous patches and upgrades, and the most recent is by far the most significant. That's because, as of version 1.019 released this past June, *RoF* now boasts one of flight simming's holy grails: an engaging, dynamic campaign.

The start of something wonderful

Although officially still in beta, *RoF*'s new Career mode puts it in a class that rivals *Red Baron 3D* from more than a decade ago. You can now join a British, French, or German squadron at any point in the war's final two years and advance your on-screen pilot through a career that melds your personal statistics and achievements with real historical events. Successful missions will earn you medals and promotions, while your AI squadron mates grow similarly in rank and ability, and receive awards for their successes (or hospitalizations for their mistakes). Once you reach the rank of Squadron Commander, you can participate in mission planning—including plane and pilot selection and route editing. Supplementing its conventional patrol and bombing sorties, *RoF* also features some intriguing new mission types. You can

now use interactive new toys like wireless radios and cameras to call in artillery fire from the air, or perform photo reconnaissance sorties. There's also a higher level of interactivity and randomness during missions. For example, if you kill a famous enemy ace, the game will remember it, and he won't re-appear in the game or continue to increase his kill total in the press (your squadron receives a daily newspaper).

This new level of squadron management and interactivity transforms *Rise of Flight* from a nifty, biplane-combat flight simulator into an engrossing, multi-layered WWI fighter pilot experience. Of course, none of it would work without first-rate aircraft and flight modeling, and *RoF* consistently delivers the goods here with

“*RoF* now boasts one of simming's holy grails.”

some of the sweetest-looking Spads, Sopwiths, and Fokkers (each featuring convincing high fidelity physics) to ever grace a commercial flight sim.

You can download the core game with two flyable aircraft free of charge from www.riseofflight.com, and flesh out your installation by purchasing new planes *à la carte*, or drop \$40 for the eight-aircraft *Iron Cross Edition*. New aircraft are added for sale regularly—the current count is over two dozen—but at \$8 to \$15 a pop your hangar expenses can mount quickly.

I'm currently balancing five careers (okay, one pilot's dead and another's a POW, but I had far too much invested in these guys to just cavalierly erase them from the hard drive) and I expect to spend many more exhilarating hours following the survivors through to the war's November 1918 armistice.

This grin isn't likely to disappear from my face anytime soon. ■



The French Breguet 14.B2 bomber ain't much of a dogfighter, but with Jean-Pierre riding shotgun, we do just fine.

Like it or not, RPGs have transitioned to primarily using real-time combat. There've been plenty of missteps where design ambition greatly out-reached technical proficiency, and early real-time experiments such as 1998's *Descent to Undermountain* were crudely debased interpretations of the tabletop RPGs that inspired the genre. Even the landmark games that propelled the genre into real-time, such as 1992's *Ultima Underworld*, offered tactically simplistic combat, stripped adventurers of their NPC companions, and awkwardly tried to incorporate character attributes to prevent a player's dexterity from being

“ Attacks that appear to hit but actually whiff are annoying. ”

determinative. Perhaps most importantly, the actual real-time combat wasn't very satisfying—fighting in first-person perspective in RPGs in particular often consisted of just “two-stepping” forward and backward.

Now, finally (as I discussed last month), technology and developer skill have caught up with design ambitions, and the compromises imposed by the transition to real-time combat have largely been overcome. To some ardent gamers, no iteration of real-time combat will ever be a worthy substitute for a turn-based system, and so they've eschewed or remained deeply cynical of real-time RPGs. For them, I can recommend turn-based Japanese and independent RPGs, including some gems like the recently released *Avadon: The Black Fortress*. Troika's *Temple of Elemental Evil* remains a guilty pleasure of mine, which the crew at Circle of Eight (www.co8.org) continue to enhance.

For most of us, however, the turn-based versus real-time combat battle is over. So what advice can we give developers to further improve the use of real-time combat in RPGs? Here are my four suggestions:

1. Combat's just one method of dispute resolution, albeit a thoroughly cathartic one. Nothing says “I disagree” more viscerally than a warhammer to the melon of a contrarian, but to retain depth, developers shouldn't abandon other methods of solving tasks and circumventing obstacles, whether through dialog, exploration, or creative use of available resources.

2. Party-based combat is still viable, as BioWare has clearly demonstrated in the *Mass Effect* games. *Dragon Age 2*, for all its flaws, also showed some remarkable improvements in scripting that allowed AI-controlled companions to function reasonably well independently. That's a big step toward overcoming one of the primary shortcomings of real-time combat in RPGs, and with it, even a primarily single-character game can effectively utilize companions in certain circumstances (see *Fallout 3*'s Dogmeat.)

3. Include meaningful difficulty levels, and not just by cynically bestowing an inordinate amount of hitpoints on enemies. Action-oriented combat requires difficulty levels to account for varying player skill levels, so embrace that necessity by actually making it more rewarding to play at higher difficulties. Consider making fights that unfold differently, varying content, and granting achievements to both reward and incent replay.

4. Skill-based attacks don't work, because attacks that visually appear to hit their mark but actually whiff are unintuitive and annoying. Nobody wants to feel like the doomed fool in *Pulp Fiction* who missed six shots at point-blank range. Instead of using character attributes

to determine accuracy to cause players to miss opponents squarely in their sights, use attributes to determine damage or effects to make character skill feel relevant.

Real-time combat in RPGs has evolved to be varied, tactical, sophisticated, and rewarding. *Risen*, *Mass Effect 3*, *Fallout 3*, *Skyrim*, and *DA2* all approach real-time combat differently, but each one retains substantial RPG depth. Computer RPGs have evolved beyond their tabletop roots, and properly executed, real-time combat is a great way to do battle in their worlds. ■



If companions in *Mass Effect 3* can handle themselves, who needs pausing?



Desslock is happily weighing combat of *Avadon: The Black Fortress* against *Fallout: New Vegas* and the *Mass Effect* games, using *Plants vs. Zombies* as a misplaced arbiter. Email him at alternatelives@pcgamer.com.

It's already taken over MMOs, MOBAs, and shooters: the free-to-play (F2P) business model is about to become a major part of the real-time strategy game landscape. I'm not sure how I feel about that. I tend to be pessimistic about the future and the changes it brings, even though I'm often wrong about them in the end.

For years I used Steam under protest, and wrung my hands about the importance of physical copies. Now I repurchase digital copies of my old games because I find them more convenient.

Likewise, F2P raises the possibility of annoying nickel-and-diming and grind-heavy designs—but also promises advantages that could improve the RTS genre by making it easier for developers to give us what we want.

Developers love it. Listening to Gas Powered Games' founder Chris Taylor talk about *Age of Empires Online*, the F2P model solves a lot of problems. For instance, he says it lets developers allocate resources more intelligently so they can focus on what players really like. "Instead of bundling a whole bunch of content with a single game, and then all you have is, 'Did people have fun or not with the whole game?' You have a more granular level of understanding of what they liked or didn't like," he says.

That's important information, because keeping players around and willing to spend means keeping them happy. Taylor says F2P lets him keep his best guys on that task. "Under this new model," Taylor says, "the team doesn't move on [to the next game]. I think that is a huge improvement in the way games can be developed, because there's this synergy and expertise—these guys who know how every little piece of the code works. So when you get to keep working, the game really starts to get to a whole new level of good."

Age of online

Is that the future of the hardcore RTS? I'm not so sure. The short existence of *Company of Heroes Online* (September 2, 2010–March 31, 2011) showed what a delicate thing game balance can be, and how paid "premium" aspects of a game might never quite mesh with the core design of an RTS like *Company of Heroes*. *CoHO* was clearly an experiment, repurposing a finished game to gather data about a new business model and market, and that experiment sounded some cautionary alarms.

Here are a few more: the week or so I've puttered around with the *AoEO* beta has made me less excited for the August 16 launch

than I am for re-installing *Age of Mythology*. In a lot of ways it encapsulates my hopes and fears for what F2P RTS games will be: it is at once a classic-style *AoE* game that recreates the gameplay of the *AoE2: Age of Kings*, and also a painful "RTS for Dummies" slog, due to the excessively long, simplistic, tutorial-style quest chain that greets new players.

Slow off the line

While the final game will let players buy their way out of those intro quests' tedium by purchasing a "pro" civilization, that's exactly the kind of "buy content or we'll bore you to death" blackmail that makes me wary of F2P. Call me old-fashioned, but it seems easier and more rewarding to just go to the bargain aisle of Best Buy and grab one of the original *Age* games, then I can

Is free-to-play the future of RTS? I'm not so sure.

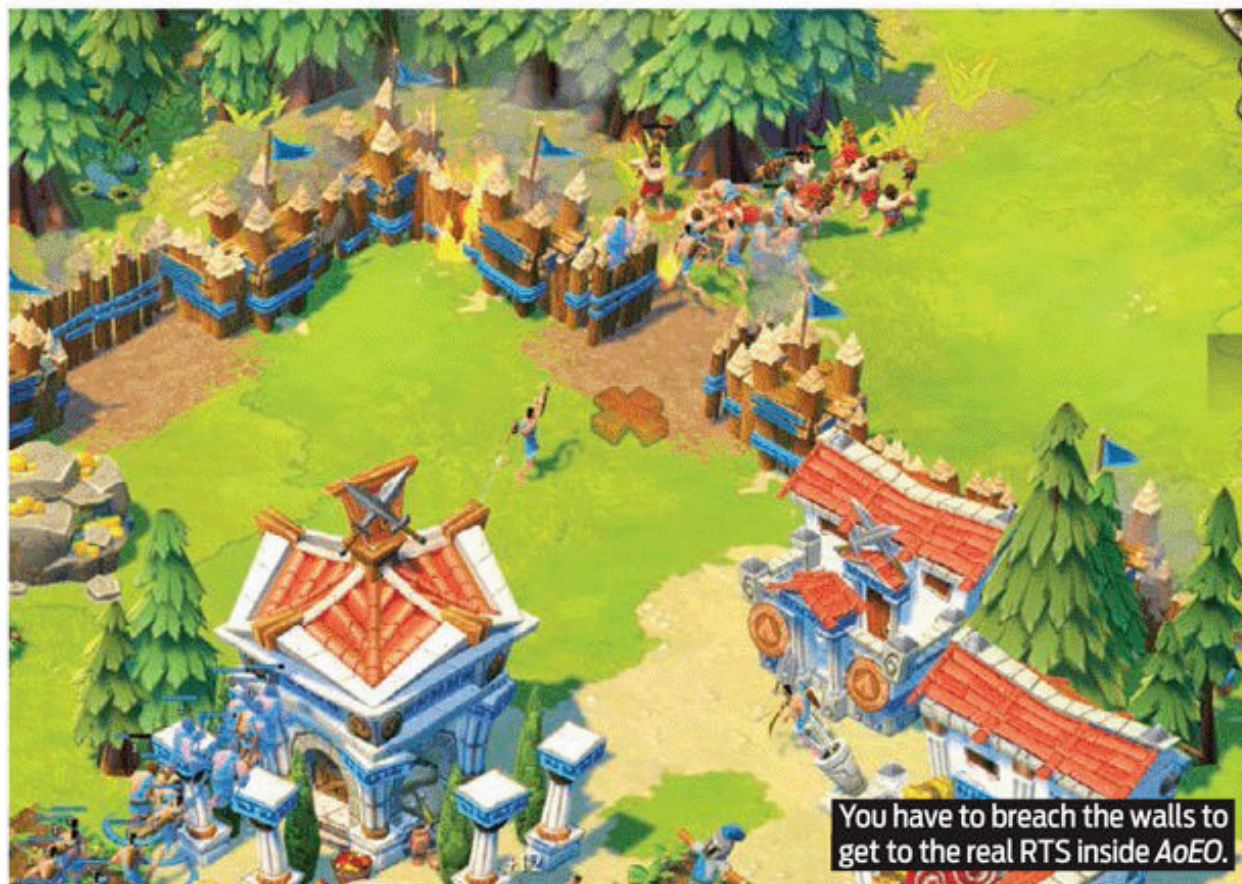
get right to skirmishing with the full roster of techs and civilizations. I have to wonder if *AoEO* can find a happy medium between providing the well-balanced, intricate RTS multiplayer I love and the bite-sized, easy challenges that invite casual gamers.

Maybe I'm wrong; perhaps F2P won't mean much of a change for dedicated RTS fans. Instead of spending \$50 on a new game at launch, we'll spend \$10 to \$20 apiece to unlock a couple of factions and skip straight to competitive play, and parcel out the remaining change on the odd expansion or map set. It's not a bad deal, and if developers really are able to be smarter and more responsive, it might even be better than the old ways.

To hold our attention, it'll have to be. ■



Freelance writer **Rob Zacny** hosts the Three Moves Ahead strategy podcast. He's currently procrastinating with *FEAR 3*, *Pride of Nations*, and *Vertex Dispenser*. Email him at tacticaladvantage@pcgamer.com.



You have to breach the walls to get to the real RTS inside *AoEO*.

Is the beginning of a game more important than the end?

YES Hook me from the start, or even a great ending won't matter.



NO Save the best for last—the ending needs to be a reward worth fighting for.



TYLER: Games are like relationships. At the end, they get more difficult, more explosive, and more memorable, but the beginning—when it's all fresh and sexy and stuff—is actually the best part. If the first act fails to woo me, why should I stick around for the dramatic ending?

DAN: I love a strong start as much as the next guy, but it's wasted without a stronger finish. How many times have you been sucked into a great game, only to walk away with the bitter taste of a lame, *BioShock*-style finale in your mouth, tainting the entire memory of the experience? End a game with a spectacular, *Mass Effect 2*-style nail-biter, and you'll forgive its mineral-mining warts and look back on it as an amazing gaming experience.

TYLER: It's about the journey, not the destination, Dan. My whole experience isn't instantly tainted if the ending doesn't blow my brains out my nose. I remember *BioShock* fondly as a whole, *especially* for its awesome introduction. If it hadn't sucked me in immediately, I wouldn't have enjoyed it enough to be disappointed by the ending in the first place.

DAN: Nonsense, it's all about escalation! What if *Star Wars* had blown up the Death Star after the opening crawl, and concluded with a Star Destroyer chasing the Tantive IV? What if Frodo had thrown the One Ring into the fires of Mount Doom in the first chapter, and the rest of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy had been about walking back to the Shire? The opening should just *hint* at things to come—it's the finale's job to actually deliver them.

TYLER: You're nonsense! I'm not saying the narrative structure should be reversed, but that the opening most significantly impacts the overall experience. Remember the ending to *Half-Life*? Nope! But the incredible beginning made the lackluster conclusion worth seeing.

DAN: No part of a game should suck, but here's the cold, hard truth: unless you bought a game for a handful of buttons and pocket lint during the latest Steam sale, you're already in for \$50. Even if the beginning isn't the best part, you're gonna keep playing past it just to try to extract your money's worth of entertainment out of it. It doesn't have to be anything special.

TYLER: Sure, you'll trudge forward out of buyer's remorse, begging the game to get better, but at that point it has already failed. Don't cram the best stuff behind a barrier of blah! Introducing a universe and setting a plot in motion is the most difficult narrative undertaking—do it right, whet my appetite, and I'll eat up whatever flashy dessert comes at the end, even if it's a profiterole. I hate those things.

DAN: Can't you see that people like you are destroying everything gamers hold dear? This front-loading of all the cool stuff is what created the four-hour game—shooters in particular. Putting all the best gameplay up front makes the rest of the game boring by comparison, so the solution is to not make “a rest of the game” at all!

TYLER: Can't you see that you're completely wrong in every way? You only get to make one first impression, and if I'm not hooked, the ending is already neutered. If, however, a game blows me away in the first hour, it only ups the stakes for the rest of the game—I can't help it if the designers lazily peter out later. But hell, I'd rather play a shorter, fully-realized game—like *Portal*—than a game that doesn't matter until the end.

DAN: As legendary showman P.T. Barnum once said, “Always leave them wanting more.” Games and circuses have that much in common: a powerful, *coup de gras* ending keeps gamers thinking about it for years, recommending it to their friends, and on the edge of their seats awaiting the sequel. ■

FACE OFF



Reviews Editor
Dan Stapleton's
least favorite
movie is *The*
Never Ending Story.



Associate Editor
Tyler Wilde
thinks this could be
the beginning of a
beautiful friendship.

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with? Be heard at
letters@pcgamer.com.

"Everything the light touches is a part of our jetpack kingdom."



TRIBES: ASCEND

HANDS-ON Fast, fluid, and free to play

Capture the flag is a lost art. Sure, *Call of Duty* and other FPSes might include a CTF multi-player option, but they're usually just in place to inflate the number of modes they have—like that superfluous setting between "Smoothie" and "Liquefy" on your blender.

Stealing another man's banner is a fine dance. It's a tangle of theft, alarm, pursuit, panic, and apprehension. To express all that, your game has to be built from the ground up with CTF as its centerpiece. *Starsiege: Tribes* was such a game. And seven years after, a group of independent developers in Georgia, Hi-Rez Studios, are picking up where the franchise left off with *Ascend*—a multi-player-only, free-to-play take on *Tribes*

built on Unreal Engine 3.

I visited the developer's Alpharetta, GA office to playtest *Ascend*, and left with it squared away in my mind as one of the best-looking, best-feeling shooters of the year. After

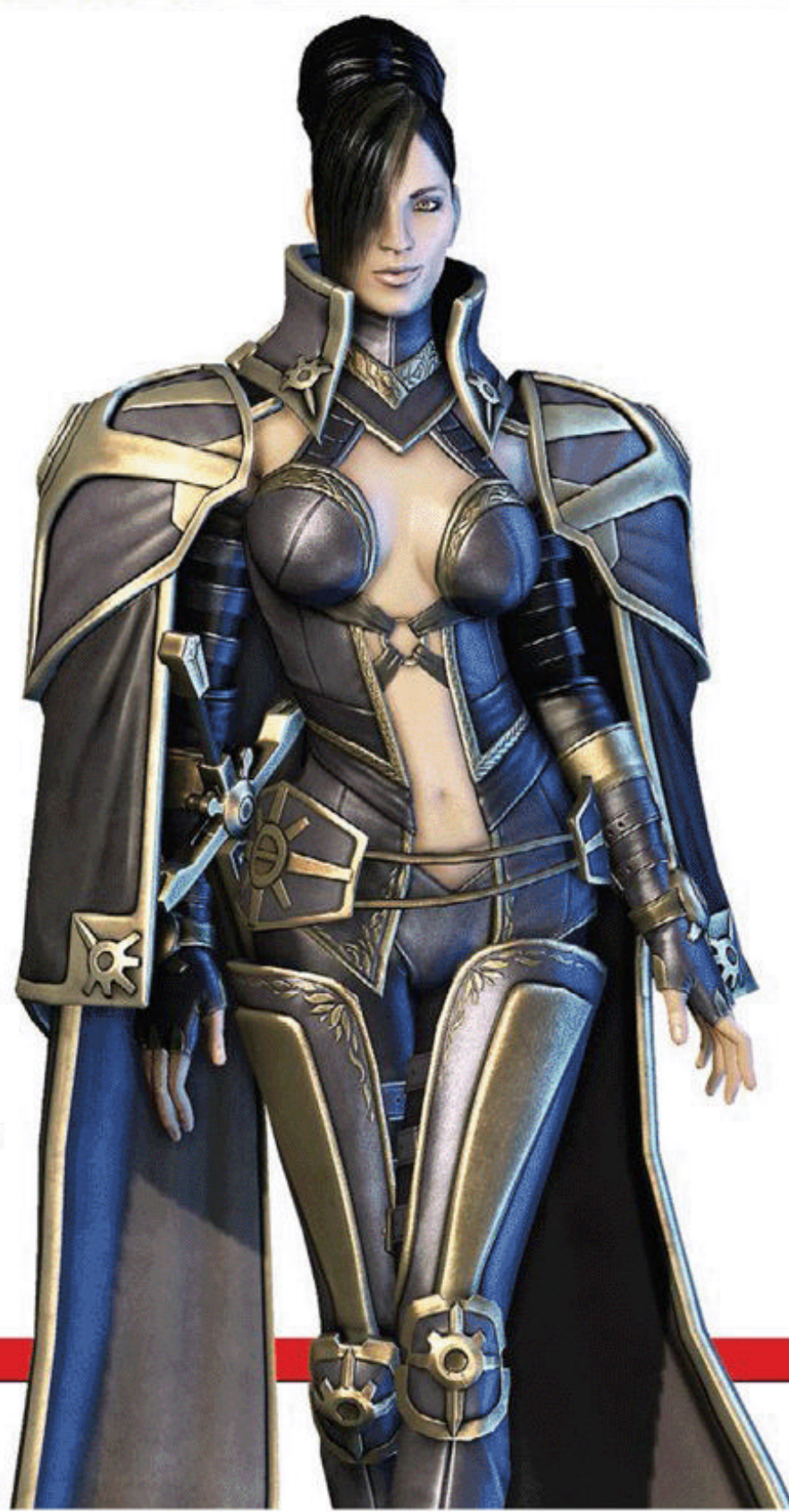
years of grounded military FPSes, jetpacking in an open expanse is like being sprung from a leash.

Jetpack joust

"We'll do a five-two-four." On a whiteboard, the Lead Designer (and our team captain) Scott Zier starts his strategy by dividing the team. It's the same way you'd separate soccer players: offense, midfield, defense. I'm huddled in an office with half of Hi-Rez, the side that's been assigned to the Blood Eagle team in our afternoon playtest. We talk about the threat of tanks, and how it's best to leapfrog over them with your jetpack and strike from above to exploit the slow rotation of their turret.

Zier asks me what role I want. "Flag-runner." I didn't fly across North America to play *Tribes* like another shooter—I want to be on the front line, gliding on hilltops. For one, I need to see first-hand how Hi-Rez has handled skiing—*Tribes*' most precious nuance.

Skiing is jetpack parkour. It's a literal term—it refers to skimming along the



READ ME

PUBLISHER

Hi-Rez Studios

DEVELOPER

Hi-Rez Studios

LINK

www.tribesascend.com



Tagging a mid-air enemy with the Spinfuser is still one of gaming's coveted skillshots.



Leaping off a speeder bike at high velocity flings you forward—a great maneuver for making a move for the flag.

surface of a map, using the downward slope of hilltops to accelerate, and then sling-shotting yourself over more hills and crests to chain that momentum.

We load into Dry Dock, a rolling landscape with the occasional conifer, overlooked by elephantine capital ships that crawl through the skybox. I pick a light-armored loadout, and hum out a wide, flat bunker embedded in the ground connected to our base. I make for the first mound I see, floating to the highest point of the hill—but not over it—and then letting off the gas as I sled down the other side. I'm skiing.

And it feels natural, more than it has in any other *Tribes* game. What *Ascend* seems to eliminate is that hidden magic of how to initiate the technique—starting a ski is relatively easy, but maintaining it isn't.

There's no auto-correct or training wheels that do the work for you—it's still a balancing act of maintaining momentum and direction while keeping your speed high.

Todd Harris, COO at Hi-Rez, describes the studio's approach to adapting skiing—once a glitch within *Tribes*—into a primary mechanic: "We have certainly embraced skiing more so than within previous *Tribes* titles. We've added a UI overlay that clearly communicates to the player how quickly they are moving while skiing—that helps motivate you to ski fast enough to hit the red-zone. We have no code-enforced maximum speed, meaning an experienced player can have a huge movement advantage. We've also incorporated ski routes into our level design process so the playable maps really take advantage of the ski mechanics."

Ascend's arsenal

New looks for Tribes' sci-fi weaponry

Arx Buster



Chaingun



Grenade Launcher



Laser Targeter



Mortar Launcher



Nova Colt



Phase Rifle



Repair Gun



Shotgun



SMG



Spinfuser



Turret





Other than defending your generator room, don't expect too much indoor combat.



Waterskiing isn't a feature, sadly.



It may become a multiplatform game, but for now Ascend is only being developed for the PC.

Still gliding at the enemy base, I click right mouse, emptying my battery to retain as much velocity as I can. I crest the hill, but overshoot—I'm now fully airborne, braking in spurts as my battery recharges to avoid fall damage. A white streak knocks me down as I find the ground. I'd silhouetted myself against the sky by overshooting that hill, and lost most of my speed returning to the ground. A sniper had spotted me. Getting up to speed may be simple, but you'll definitely be able to distinguish between players who're skiing expertly and those who aren't.

Gearing up

Tribes is a game about movement. And Frisbee guns. On the latter, *Ascend* is loyally adapting existing guns while adding to the arsenal. The Spinfusor is still a slow-loading, straight-firing, exploding disc launcher, and the mainstay of *Tribes* combat. Handheld mortars (and their familiar, gamma-ray green tracer tail), still bombard from afar, making areas unsafe for defenders or wearing down defensive turrets with their wide splash damage. *Tribes 2*'s cloak backpack is here, too, letting infiltrators disappear completely at the cost of massive battery drain.

My favorite new weapon is the Arx Buster. It's a semi-auto rifle that shoots timed

mines, but the bombs' fuses only light once they've made contact with something (or someone). Midway through our match, I use it to lead an aggressor moving at high speed, reading the route taken and mining the path ahead with three or four charges to

Tribes is a game about movement. And Frisbee guns.

give myself enough room for error. Later, I dismantle a tank with the Arx—attaching the mines to the hull is like hitting the broad side of a barn.

Tribes' free-to-play model means that access to all of these weapons won't be automatic, however. Before each match of *Ascend*, you'll choose a loadout. Loadouts are everything you're carrying (two weapons, an explosive, your "pack"), plus your armor type (light, medium, or heavy). Hi-Rez's founder, Erez Goren, is a die-hard *League of Legends* player, and the studio as a whole seems to admire Riot Games' business model—offering rotating, trial access to champions, then putting permanent access to champions and cosmetic options up for sale. Expect a similar situation for loadouts—a medium armor Soldier loadout

with an assault rifle, and grenade launcher; or an Engineer with a repair gun, and turret may be free—but you might have to pay for the sniper loadout you like. Pricing for these loadouts is unrevealed.

Sure, there's an outside possibility that Hi-Rez will be too aggressive with loadout pricing; barring that, the only concern I walked away with was the absence of intricate indoor settings in *Ascend*. I was only given time with two of the "at least" four maps it'll launch with, but both lacked the expansive base designs that I'm so fond of in the franchise. Maybe I'm sentimental, but spending a round embedded in your generator room focused on defense was a great break from the pace of outdoor combat.

Otherwise, *Ascend* should be on every PC gamer's radar. In motion, it shames blockbuster games: brightly lit expanses are punctuated by neon sparks, velocity trails, and other rich particle effects. Mostly, *Ascend* is terrifically sport-like. When a flag leaves its base, the entire battle orbits around it, whirling like a tornado filled with plasma weapons and armored, sci-fi men. Right now, that couldn't be a more novel contrast against the FPSes that are still chasing *Call of Duty*'s tail. ■

Evan Lahti



The Stages of Flag Grief Your flag is gone, but understanding is the first step to recovery (of your flag)

Denial
"This isn't happening!"



Anger
"Shazbot!"



Bargaining
"I'll be a better defender. I'll build turrets. I'll—"



Depression
"It was a lousy flag anyway."



Acceptance
"Wait—if we steal their flag, they can't capture ours."

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Gnolls are speedy, durable, and generally a pain in the ass.

ORCS MUST DIE

HANDS-ON The best defense: a good offense—and walls that shoot arrows

I never feel powerful in tower defense games. Even when I create some murderous bottleneck, or I get synergy going between a freeze turret and a mortar, or plant a smart Potato Bomb—at best, I feel like a really skilled car wash operator.

There's room for tea-sipping. And as an ever-twitching FPS gamer with Red Bull for blood, I don't like feeling passive, or locked into the rails of a machine that's already in motion. If tower defense games

are a car wash, playing *Orcs Must Die* is like wading into that suds-and-water tunnel yourself—wrapped in a scuba suit, spraying a hose, slinging soap, lunging with the sponge. You're inside the machinery,

directly involved in the process of subtracting what shouldn't be there (orcs).

Your character is your agent for all this—the War Mage: a brash, magical, crossbow-wielding guardian that could be Bruce Campbell's cousin. You play behind his back, at a ground-level perspective. The War Mage can make headshots. He can sprint and jump. During

I feel like I've left an oven on too long, except the oven is dragons.

my hands-on, I grab a single orc in the air with my Wind Belt, suspending him in midair before air-blasting him across the room into an acid pit. As I'm taking my time with this mortal volleyball, spinning

blades I installed down the hall are crashing out, thinning the horde.

Cross-pollinated

OMD is an action game that takes place inside a horde-mode defense game. You're a warrior-engineer, coping with the well-armed conga line of orcs by killing them directly, and by lining the surfaces of the dungeon you're defending with traps. Mostly, it's an endless cycle of panic and relief (like any good tower defense game). As waves get bigger, enemies inevitably slip through and you've got to apprehend the runoff with your weapons and spells.

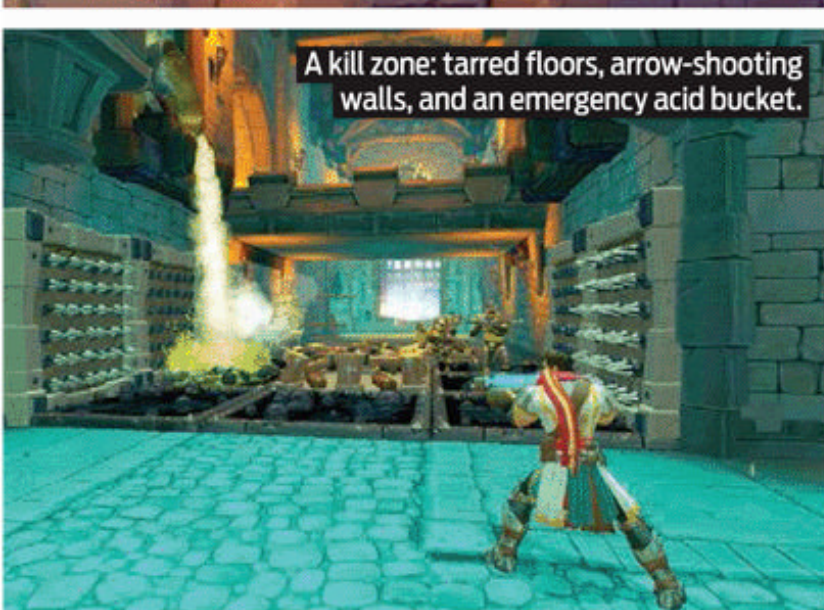
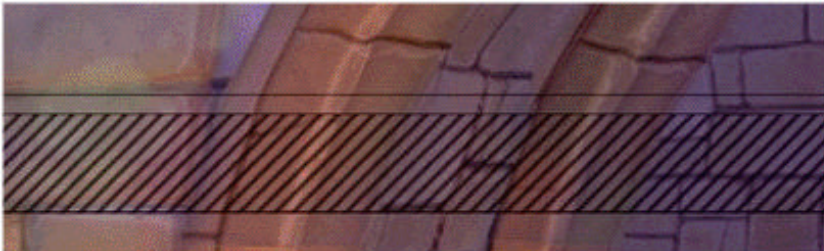
Naturally, your approach depends on the layout of the level. Early stages usually have a single, narrow path that the orcs advance on to help you focus on learning the trap mechanics. But in a late-game dungeon, I have to deal with two

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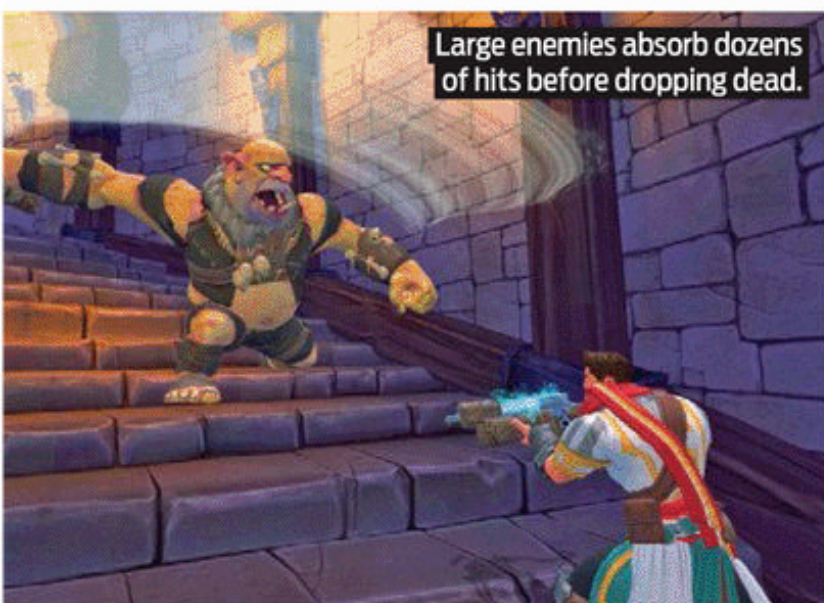
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A kill zone: tarred floors, arrow-shooting walls, and an emergency acid bucket.



Large enemies absorb dozens of hits before dropping dead.



The Push Trap is perfect for narrow ledges that overlook an acid pit.

TRAP SYNERGY

Reliable combos for dealing with orc hordes



Ice Amulet + Swinging Mace

Freeze an enemy beneath the spiked pendulum and they'll suffer several hits instead of just one. If they die there, they'll shatter into a pile of cubes.



Spring Trap + Pounder

Ceiling-mounted Pounders squash enemies, but they have a long cooldown. The springed floor kicks back orcs that sneak through, giving them another chance to trigger the Pounder.



Brimstone + Decoy

Decoys lure orcs within a certain radius. Surrounding these distractions with Brimstone saps their HP as they beat on your punching bag.

parallel, independent lanes. The crossbow lets me reach both places if I stand on the small median, but I lose visibility of one lane if I run into the other. I can't straddle 'em both. I have to make a decision between loading one lane up with traps and focusing my attacking on the opposite side, or splitting my devices across both lanes.

I go for symmetry. I lay brimstone pits on both sides—orange-hot coal fires that singe the HP of any enemy that walks over them. Then, they get hit by a giant mace ball, my ever-swinging pendulum that golfs greenskins. I place a Grinder a few yards from the exit—a flat wall with two rotating, spiked cylinders that doesn't have much horizontal reach, but turns any orcs that come close into a jumble of green ham.

But four waves in, my battle plan gets

shattered. Slow-flying dragons are floating out of the orcs' entry point, and none of my ground-targeting traps can touch them as they move up a separate, middle lane. I feel like I've left an oven on too long, except the oven is dragons. They're already halfway to the exit when I notice them. I have to pull out my Ice Amulet and all of my mana to knock them out of the air with hailstones.

Since *Pac-Man*, clearing a board of all dots has had an innate appeal for gamers. There's just something ever-satisfying about subtraction as a mechanic. That's essentially what *OMD* is about—giving you hundreds of orc-shaped, angry fires to put out—by folding action and malicious dungeon redecorating into a potent, satisfying horde mode that's endlessly empowering. ■

Evan Lahti

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- GAMING EXCELLENCE



"READER'S CHOICE NOMINEE FOR
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"UNLIMITED
POWER!"
cackle

HARD RESET

HANDS-ON Pigs fly—*Deus Ex* meets *Painkiller* in Flying Wild Hog's first FPS

I knew that glow from a mile away—the way it pulsed and beeped—I could practically smell the damn thing: a terminal. “Hack,” a quick prompt told me as I approached. Hardened by years of gaming experience, I braced for an obnoxious minigame. But nothing happened. And that’s when I realized that *Hard Reset* isn’t like other modern FPSes. Oh, sure, every electrified pore of this PC-exclusive—built by a team that includes former *Painkiller* devs—crackles with cyberpunk chic, but make no mistake: this is a game about shooting things. Does it move? Shoot it. Has it stopped moving? Shoot it more. Is it a wall? Shoot it anyway—just to be safe.

Hard Reset doesn’t bother with filler. And why should it? After all, there are 50-foot-tall nanomachine statues of Greek gods that need killing.

The road to that big fat Greek showdown,

however, could be a bit more straightforward. *Hard Reset*’s premise pelted me with jargon-laden curveballs until I was an ugly mass of black-and-blue. Here’s the gist, though: it’s the year 2436, and humanity has its hands full with a race of hyper-sophisticated AIs. As Fletcher, a security specialist for the monolithic Corporation, I was tasked with investigating a hospital break-in by some nefarious robo-ne’er-do-wells. Then the game started mentioning “The Sanctuary,” “exterior AIs,” and “quantum entanglement,” and, well, at least its gorgeous comic book cutscenes were easy on the eyes.

Up your arsenal

Really, though, I doubt *Hard Reset*’s gunning for any writing awards. If you were to grab a scalpel and go digging through the game’s guts, you’d find tons of guns, even more enemies, and little else. This isn’t just a simple throwback to the heydays of *Painkiller* and *Serious Sam*,

though. *Hard Reset*’s sticking its tongue out at *Halo* and its ilk by giving the oh-so-trendy two-gun limit a much-needed makeover. Make no mistake: Fletcher’s not some Rambo-style walking armory. He does, however, have an ace up his sleeve—or rather, about 20 of them. See, Fletcher only carries two guns (one mechanical and one energy based), but they’re essentially handheld

It’s the year 2436, and humanity has its hands full with a race of hyper-sophisticated AIs.

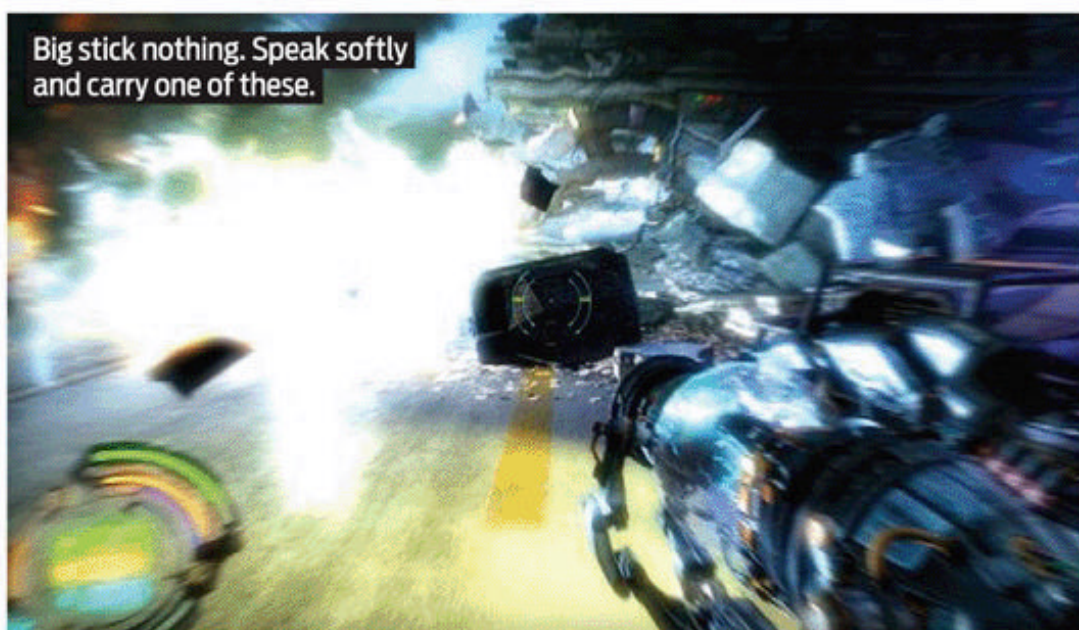
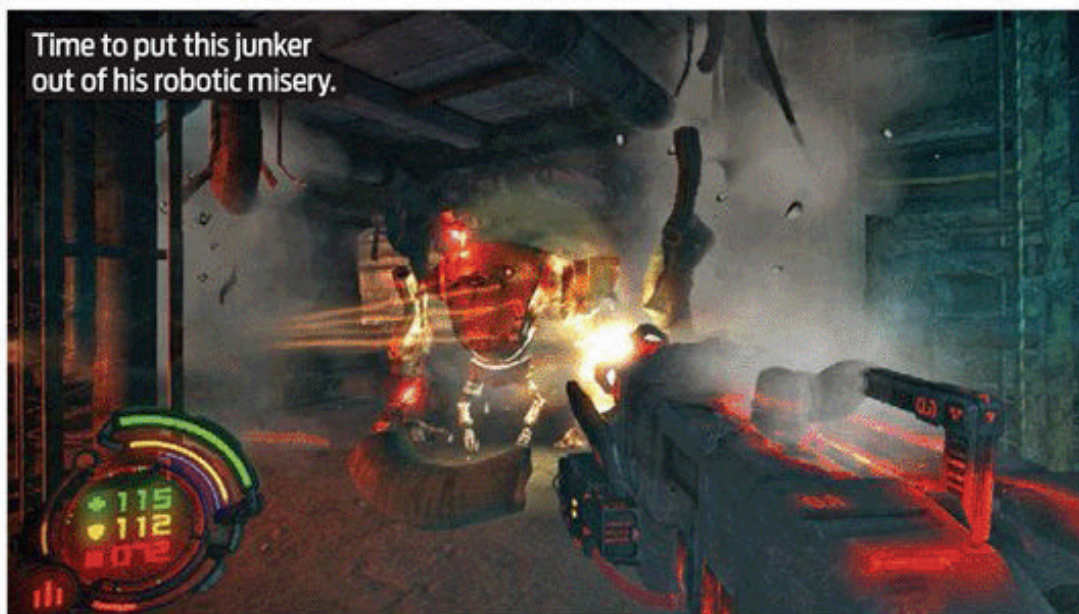
Transformers—both in their ability to, you know, *transform*, and their subtle use of explosions every 2.3 seconds.

Fully upgraded, both of your guns have five unique firing modes, each of which branch into upgrades and alternate firing modes of their own. Sound confusing?

READ ME
PUBLISHER
N/A

DEVELOPER
Flying Wild Hog

LINK
www.
flyingwildhog.com



SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Hard Reset puts dramatic new spins on familiar weapons

Emperor from
Star Wars



EMP



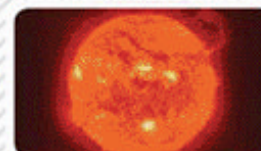
Shock Blaster

A lightning gun that also stops machines in their tracks.

Tank



The Sun



Particle Cannon

A giant freaking laser.

9-year-old who
regularly kicks your ass



Casper the
Assassin Ghost



Smart Gun

A gun that aims itself and shoots through walls.

Elmer's Glue



Zeus,
the God of Thunder



Electric Mortar

A lightning mine that traps enemies in place.

Bazooka



More
Bazookas



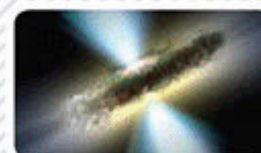
Rocket Launcher

An old favorite with a heaping helping of extra kick.

Grenade Launcher



Black Hole



Grenade Launcher

Another old favorite with a super-powered gravitational field as its alternate fire.

It's really not. Scrolling through modes is as simple as switching weapons in any other FPS, which is good, because *Hard Reset* doesn't bother with cover, or stopping to make sure you're not having a heart attack, or any of that nonsense.

In my experience, encounters unfolded something like this: I entered a room; enemy bots of large, small, and gigantic varieties swarmed every conceivable surface; then, I backpedaled a bit until I was able to decide on the right firing mode for the situation. For instance, the Shock Blaster's EMP mode was perfect for enclosed areas. After paralyzing my pursuers, victory was as simple as doing my best Emperor Palpatine impression and frying those bastard bots before they came

to. And when explosive containers entered the picture? *Yeesb*. I almost didn't have the heart to do it. Almost.

Blue screen of death

That's just the tip of the iceberg. *Hard Reset*'s arsenal has modes that can see through walls, fire SUV-sized lasers, aim on their own, and do tons more. Even so, the game's pretty damn challenging—especially given that guns require quite a bit of upgrading before they can pull off all those neat tricks. To make up for that, the areas I played kept things almost suffocatingly simple. Levels, for instance, stuck to the straight-and-narrow, only opening up for wildly entertaining arena battles every once in a while. Enemy types, meanwhile,

started repeating themselves in a hurry and—for self-proclaimed hyper-evolved AIs—they didn't have the best, well, AI.

Hard Reset's old-school to its circle-strafing core, though, so my demo broke its repetitive rhythm with a blast from FPS past: an actual boss fight. The multi-story statue of Atlas walked slowly, but carried a missile-pod-shaped stick. The scale of the battle was insane, but my towering foe crumbled after a few blasts to his suitably ancient glowing weak points.

That marriage of old and new is set to define *Hard Reset*. Will it topple *Call of Duty* and its regime of barking military men? Of course not. But will it be a ridiculous good time? Fifty-foot-tall Atlas says, "Hello." ■

Nathan Grayson

Release SEPTEMBER



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May contain content
inappropriate for children.
Visit www.esrb.org for
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Eurogamer

"The most impressive systems I've seen in an FPS"

PC Gamer

www.redorchestra2.com

METRO: LAST LIGHT

FIRST LOOK Back in the USSR—with multiplayer?

There are three key principles behind *Metro: Last Light*. The first is not to mess with the spirit of the original, which THQ calls its “flawed masterpiece.” Based on the best-selling books by Dmitri Glukhovsky, *Metro 2033* was set in Moscow after a nuclear apocalypse, where the few humans who survived are living in the bomb-proof tunnels of the underground rail network. Isolated from the rest of the world, the stations survive as city-states, where most people never travel more than 500 yards from home and die young from respiratory diseases. In between the stations (and on the surface) are mutated monstrosities, radiation, and poison gases. In the first *Metro* you played Artyom, a Ranger who faced off against a mysterious threat called the Dark Ones. You’ll play him again here.

The second principle is to fix the problems that made the masterpiece flawed, particularly the AI and stealth. The third is to push the tech so it’s still the benchmark for graphics cards. The demo

we are shown isn’t, for that reason, a real mission but “something designed to survive in the madness of E3,” cobbled together from all over the game.

We’re introduced to *Last Light* with a daytime sweep of the future Moscow from the surface. Mutants crawl amid the post-apocalyptic wreckage; bat-winged

A similar game to 2033, though more cinematic and polished, and with a lot more ammo.

horrors flap in the sky. Hidden in a corner, two gas-masked Rangers are prying up a manhole cover.

Beneath the cover lies a Nazi base that the Rangers are infiltrating. Initially, Artyom sneaks in alone, using his lighter to burn away cobwebs and unscrewing bulbs to provide cover of darkness. Then he creeps up behind two sentries and quietly kills them both. At this point, he stops creeping and starts fighting, shooting his way through a well-guarded

checkpoint. Inside, he finds a ridiculous chain gun and uses it against the rushing reinforcements. You can, of course, also play through the section without firing a shot, as in the first game. So far, little has changed from 2033.

Having eliminated the opposition, Artyom reunites with his partner. Now they have to brazen their way through the Reich station to reach the tunnel on the other side and their actual objective: a prison train. It’s a traumatizing scene; the main hall of the station has been turned into a Nazi rally, complete with red banners and massed brownshirts, and you have to shove your way through the crowd while a speech is going on. As they near the exit, Artyom’s partner fires his pistol, sparking a chase through the station’s slums, with Artyom taking a bullet as he rolls under a closing security door.

A second chase sequence follows, taking place in motorized railcars as Artyom uses a rifle and a grenade-equipped sub-machine gun to eliminate chasing Nazis. Finally, after clearing the train of guards, Artyom manages to jump aboard and fight his way toward the engine, using

There're still plenty of mutants in the Moscow Metro.

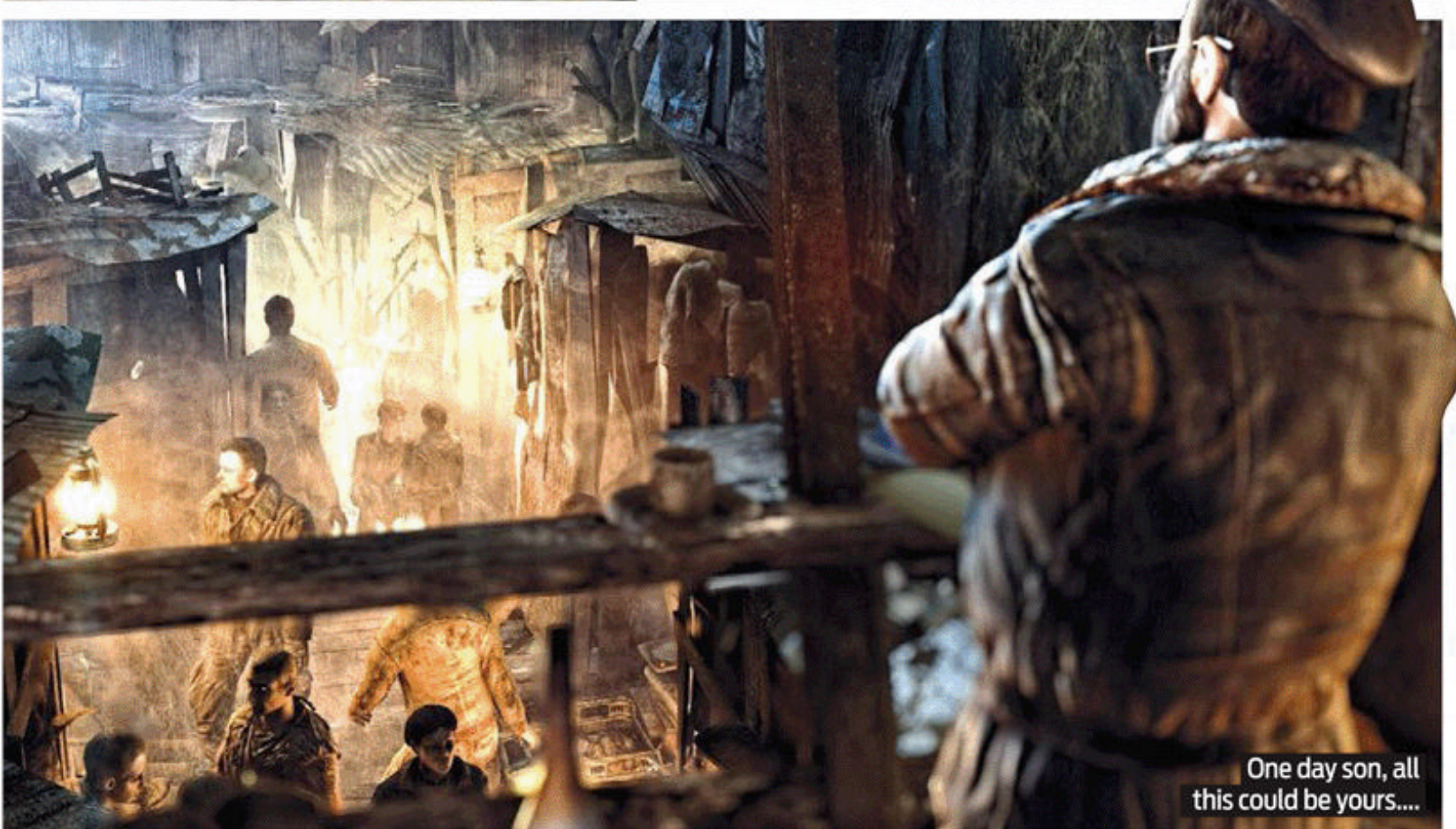
READ ME
PUBLISHER
THQ

DEVELOPER
4A Studios

LINK
www.metro
2033game.com



Trips to the city's surface offer little respite or solace.



One day son, all this could be yours....



Grimly beautiful.



Nudge your way through those laugh-a-minute Nazi types.

a shotgun pistol to eliminate the enemies who seem to be using primitive bucklers for defense. As he nears the engine, fire washes up from it and the demo ends.

So how does *Last Light* fulfill 4A's remit? This is definitely a similar game to *2033*, though more cinematic and polished, and with a lot more ammo. Will it be as buggy as the original? That seems unlikely, given THQ made 4A go back and rebuild the stealth, AI, and combat, but we'll wait and see. Is it still the benchmark for high-end systems? It's definitely going to make them work, with its proprietary engine, massed dynamic lighting, and destruction, but it's going to have a lot of competition over the next year.

The only unwelcome addition may be multiplayer—which has been confirmed, but with no details. It's hard for us to imagine a competitive context that suits *Metro*'s mechanics—we pray that it won't sap any of 4A's focus from the game's single-player as the studio takes a second crack. ■

Dan Griliopolous

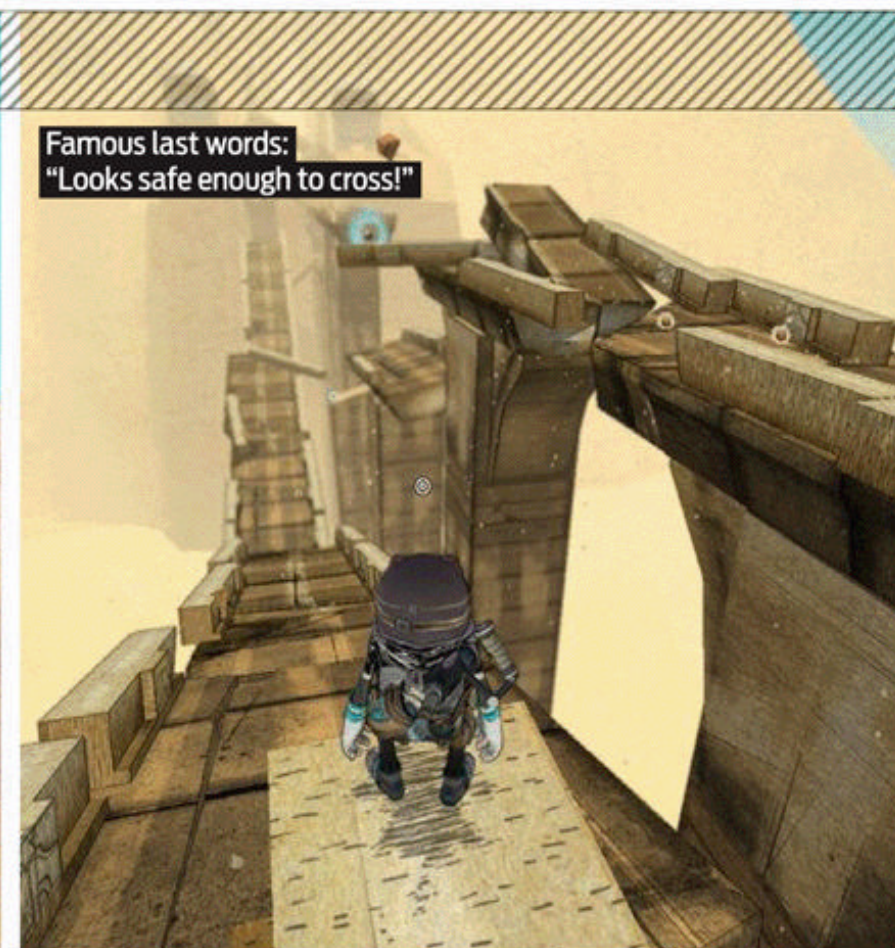
We'd heard the traffic in Moscow was bad, but this is ridiculous....



Release 2012



It's like carving a turkey.
With a death ray.



Famous last words:
"Looks safe enough to cross!"



"Die cactus, die!"

TINY & BIG IN: GRANDPA'S LEFTOVERS

HANDS-ON Creative destruction abounds in this indie physics puzzler

Hitching a robotic taxi ride deep into the desert to track down the sneaky little bastard that stole my hand-me-down underwear is a weird way to start an adventure, but I dig the way that *Tiny & Big in: Grandpa's Leftovers* juxtaposes quirkiness with ambitious gameplay.

My hands-on time with the debut episode (excepting the prototype demo, *Up That Mountain*) of this physics-heavy indie platform puzzler kicks off in an arid valley filled with statuesque pillars—a perfect playground for wanton mayhem.

Hop-ping into the skin of the game's tech-nerd protagonist, Tiny, I set out to first gather up my missing gear. I find my laser nearby and act on my first instinct: to carve up the landscape like a Thanksgiving turkey.

That bliss of demolition is amplified when I grab a rocket claw, which I attach to loose blocks to send them flying through the air. Combined with a handy grappling hook that lets me topple towers with a tug,

Of course, just wrecking stuff all to hell is a lot of fun on its own.

these gadgets offer a ton of flexibility for playful puzzle solving. But I get so absorbed in the cathartic task of slicing rock and sending giant statues of gopher-like creatures crashing down to Earth that I momentarily forget I'm supposed to be hunting down grandpa's old tighty-whities.

Moving on, I use my gizmos to create makeshift stairways, crush meddlesome creatures, and cleave thorny cacti until I reach a long, winding bridge where my underwear-thieving nemesis awaits. Chasing him across the dilapidated bridge

is an exercise in quick puzzle-solving and craftiness. He uses telekinetic mojo to hurl rocks at me; I dodge, until realizing I can split them mid-air with my laser. He zips farther away; I attach rockets to a fallen pillar and launch it across a gap to create a makeshift bridge. He upgrades his missiles from rocks to large hunks of statue; I cut the ground out from beneath him to interrupt his throw. These are the clever moments that keep me wanting to see what's next. Of course, just wrecking stuff all to hell is a lot of fun on its own.

All this creativity also carries over to *T&B's* unique presentation. Though the game plays out in 3D, every element has an immediately appealing hand-sketched look. Most puzzles amount to destroying stuff in clever ways; that alone is a blast, yet the level of challenge and puzzle variety could use some beefing up. Even in its current state, *Tiny & Big's* first major outing oozes killer style wrapped in a warm blanket of sweet destruction. ■

Nathan Meunier

READ ME

PUBLISHER

Black Pants
Game Studio

DEVELOPER

Black Pants
Game Studio

LINK

www.tinyandbig.com

Release FALL 2011

3

MONTHS AWAY

**SKULLS OF THE SHOGUN**

Turned-based tactical strategy games are good. Tactical games starring undead samurai are even better. This cartoon-y feudal war has all kinds of Japanese monsters on the battlefield.

Release TBA 2011

6

MONTHS AWAY

**DRAGON NEST**

Josh, Tyler, and Lucas played it at E3 2011, and can't wait to jump back in once it releases. Few things are better than exchanging taunts while combo-ing flashy spells and sword swipes.

Release Q4 2011

9+

MONTHS AWAY

**DOOM 4**

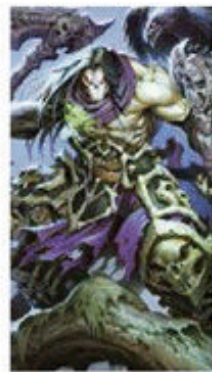
It's surreal to think that *Doom 3* was released seven years ago. We eagerly await the fourth installment's return to the old run-'n'-gun action of the first *Doom* and the abolishment of monster closets.

Release TBD

**HELLGATE**

It lives—again! The 2007 MMO is back with a vengeance, taking the mean streets of the underworld to London and Tokyo. With the resurgence of free-to-play MMOs, there's hope for this one yet.

Release Q4 2011

**DARKSIDERS II**

This sequel stars the most notorious of the Four Horsemen, Death, in the fight to rescue his imprisoned brother War. Expect more apocalyptic beatdowns when this rider hits the scene.

Release Q2 2012

**RAIDERZ**

Monster Hunter is a series that garnered ridiculous popularity in Japan. Think of this game as the PC homage to *MH*, where you band with allies to take down gargantuan bosses one at a time.

Release TBD

**SKYDRIFT**

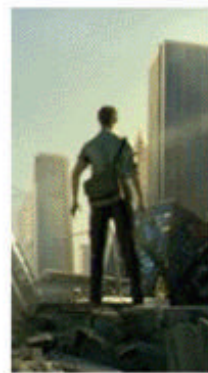
This intense arcade plane racer stirs up fond memories of the *Diddy Kong Racing* jet stages. The tagline offers sage advice: "If you can't overtake, shoot them down!" We couldn't agree more.

Release Q4 2011

**CONFRONTATION**

The tabletop fantasy war-game is coming to the PC, and we're rather intrigued. Choose your side between the Wolfen, Orcs of the Tree-Spirit, Scorpions, or Griffons, then prepare for battle.

Release TBD 2012

**I AM ALIVE**

The concept for this realistic thriller sounds fascinating: you must scrounge for survival in the ruins of a metropolitan city after a disastrous earthquake. In this game, fresh water is worth killing for.

Release TBD

**CORE BLAZE**

Another Unreal Engine 3-powered MMO joins the fray, and this one looks stunning. Slap baddies with any of four weapon styles: Sword and Shield, Great Sword, Dual Blade, or Long Bow.

Release NOVEMBER

**TRANSFORMERS: WAR FOR CYBERTRON 2**

The original *War for Cybertron* was a surprisingly good game (78%, Oct. 2010), so we've got high hopes for the sequel. As we all know, fan service is the best kind of service.

Release TBD 2012

**RIDGE RACER UNBOUNDED**

Can a franchise's legacy alone sell a game which seems to have nothing in common with its predecessors? We'll find out when this chaotic racer hits the road next year.

Release 2012

RELEASE METER

BEST GUESS**Blizzard's Project Titan**

After the supposed leak of a document detailing Blizzard's future release plans, speculation ran wild about the unfamiliar "Titan" brand marked for release in 2013. Rumors spread like wildfire that it might be FPS-based after tweaks were made to *WoW*'s latency systems, but at this point, it's all conjecture. C'mon, Blizzard! Let us in on the secret already!

ON YOUR RADAR THE TOP 13 MOST-ANTICIPATED PC GAMES

1. DIABLO III
2. STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC
3. MODERN WARFARE 3 ►►
4. GUILD WARS 2
5. THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM
6. BATTLEFIELD 3
7. ASSASSIN'S CREED REVELATIONS

"We already had a nuke, a missile from orbit...NOW WHAT?! A F**KIN' GIANT ROBOT FOR SURE!"

—@galvaomanari, via Twitter

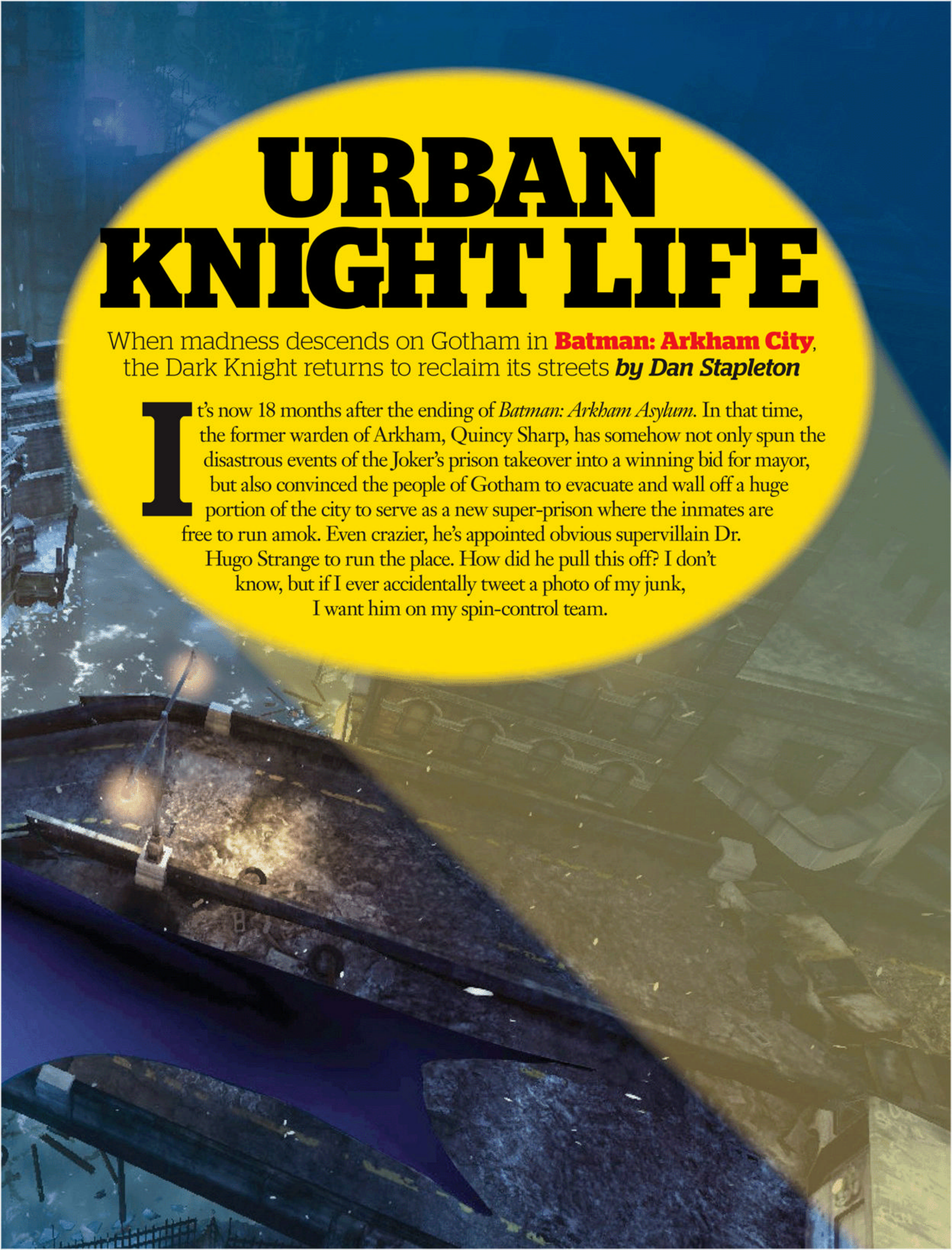
"Wait. It's not an expansion to MW2?"

—@GoodOddsAgainst, via Twitter

8. LOTR: WAR IN THE NORTH
9. MASS EFFECT 3
10. BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY
11. MAX PAYNE 3
12. NEED FOR SPEED: THE RUN
13. WARHAMMER 40K: SPACE MARINE

Source: Ipsos OTX GamePlan Insights. Top titles based on purchase intent are collected via a weekly tracking study of 1,000 active gamers in the US between the ages of 13-59. Since launching in 2008, GamePlan has collected data on over 100,000 gamers across 2,500+ titles.



The background of the entire page is a dark, atmospheric illustration of Gotham City at night. A large, bright yellow spotlight shines from the top center, creating a circular pool of light that encompasses the title and the introductory paragraph. The city below is dark and detailed, with buildings and streets visible under the moonlight. The overall tone is gritty and suspenseful, fitting the Batman theme.

URBAN KNIGHT LIFE

When madness descends on Gotham in **Batman: Arkham City**, the Dark Knight returns to reclaim its streets *by Dan Stapleton*

It's now 18 months after the ending of *Batman: Arkham Asylum*. In that time, the former warden of Arkham, Quincy Sharp, has somehow not only spun the disastrous events of the Joker's prison takeover into a winning bid for mayor, but also convinced the people of Gotham to evacuate and wall off a huge portion of the city to serve as a new super-prison where the inmates are free to run amok. Even crazier, he's appointed obvious supervillain Dr. Hugo Strange to run the place. How did he pull this off? I don't know, but if I ever accidentally tweet a photo of my junk, I want him on my spin-control team.

BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY



This is what was missing from *Asylum's* Batman simulation: the feeling of patrolling dark city streets.

Naturally, master detective Batman suspects Strange is up to no good, and heads into the *Batman: No Man's Land*-like criminal city.

And by Batman, I mean me, playing *Batman: Arkham City*. I'm standing on a Gotham—or rather Arkham—rooftop, roughly 10 stories up, intercepting radio chatter with the upgraded Cryptographic Sequencer hacking tool. Word on the street is that Catwoman is being held by Two-Face, and he plans to execute her for doing what Catwoman does best: stealing his stuff. In the distance, the iconic Bat Signal spotlight shines on the clouds above, serving as a mission beacon pointing me to Two-Face's courthouse hideout.

This being an open-world game, though, I decide that Catwoman's mortal peril can wait—I have sights to see. If this early area is any indication, Rocksteady has pulled out all the stops to make *Arkham City* a huge game—four to five times as large as *Asylum*—and yet every bit as dense with fan service. I can hardly throw a Batarang without hitting a

lore reference, from Pamela Isley's overgrown flower shop to the infamous Crime Ally behind the Monarch Theater.

"Our number-one priority wasn't to make the biggest world ever, it's to make the most detailed world ever—and the Unreal Engine is ideal for that," says Rocksteady's Marketing Game Manager Dax Ginn. "Generally, you get a big game that's not very detailed, or a detailed game that's not very big. I think we've hit a sweet spot in the middle."

Mouse with wings

I switch into my trusty Detective Vision mode and scan the streets for troublemakers, and a group of hooligans—the Black Gate thugs from *Asylum*—lights up against the blue background a block away. They're beating a civilian, who really should've known better than to walk down the streets of Violent Offendertown USA.

Holding the space bar and running forward, I automatically leap off the building and spread my cape to glide toward my objective—exactly as I did in *Asylum*. Still holding space,

I hit Ctrl, sending me into a steep plunge and rapidly accelerating to terminal velocity. Releasing Ctrl puts me back into glide mode, and pulling up converts my downward momentum into forward momentum. I can also use the grapple mid-glide, and *Arkham City's* grapple is generous with grapple points on every building, billboard, and miscellaneous object in sight. With a few moments of practice, I'm able to smoothly glide and leap from rooftop to rooftop.

This is what's missing from *Asylum's* Batman simulation: the feeling of patrolling dark city streets, stalking your prey, and choosing the right moment to take them down. In the open streets, running across a group of enemies feels more dangerous and unpredictable than *Asylum's* carefully staged encounters—especially against gun-packing henchmen. But here, you have the advantage of being able to approach from any angle and escape to the rooftops at will.

I land on top of the first thug with enough force to ensure he never walks again, and I immediately launch into a string of strikes and counters with the remaining half-dozen miscreants. In *Asylum*, the first few fights are

◆ Release October 18 ◆ Publisher Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment ◆ Developer Rocksteady Studios



CAT BURGLAR

Catwoman's got moves of her own

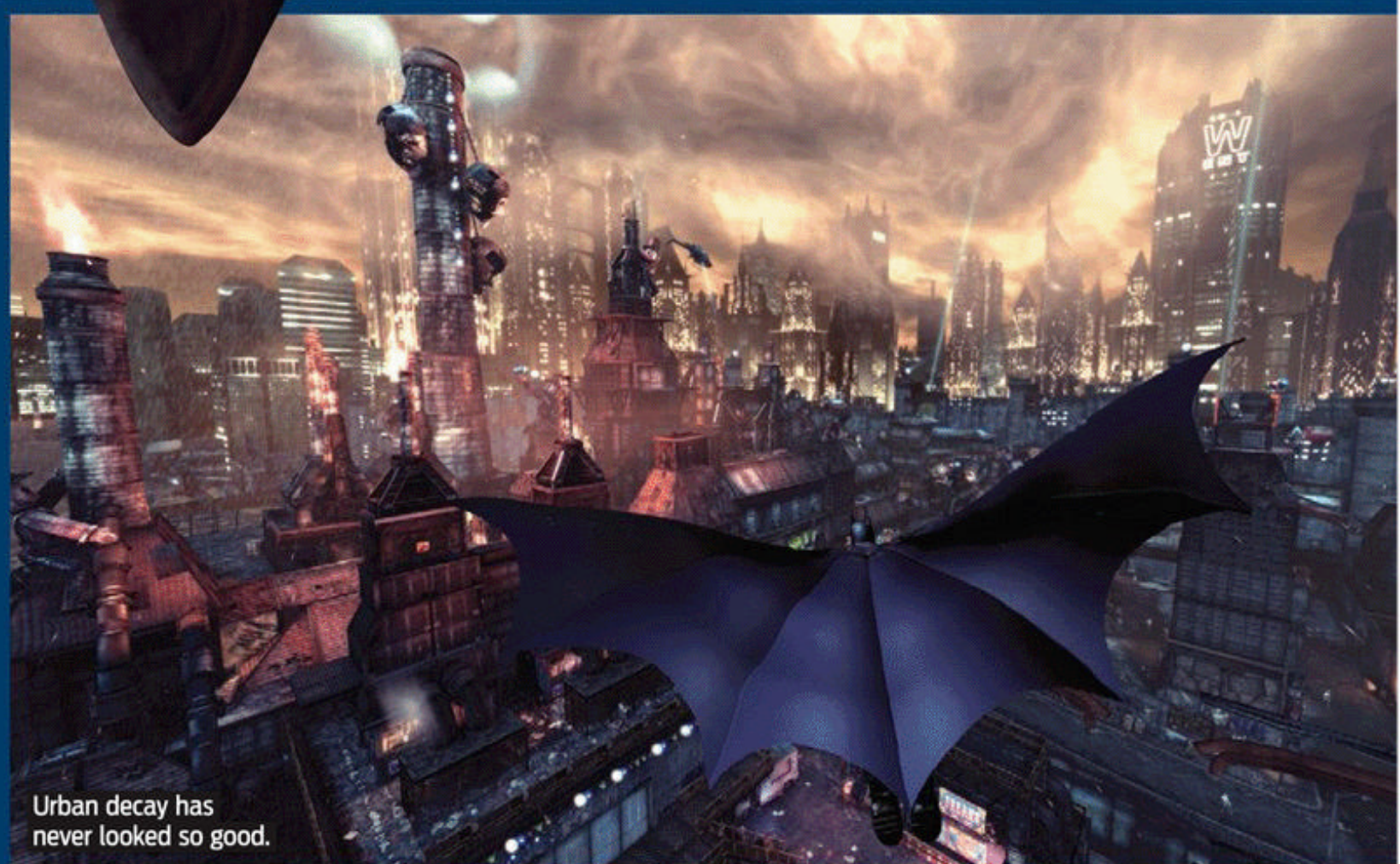
For a brief moment, I played as Selena Kyle while she attempted to rob Two-Face. Effectively, she's a sexy, pun-making re-skin of Batman, with identical controls, a whip that replaces the Batarang and grapple, and Thief Vision instead of Detective Vision. That said, all her animations are unique, and she's a blast to watch. Of course, the section I played is from the beginning of the game—she may pick up some new moves later.

a bit too basic; it isn't until halfway through the game, when you've unlocked Batman's full range of moves, that the combat really begins to shine. *Arkham City* doesn't have that problem. It's near the beginning of the game, and I already have as many moves at my disposal as I did at the end of *Asylum*.

Taking off the kid gloves

My techniques from *Asylum* carry over well—flinging Batarangs, cape-stunning, and throwing men at other men works in virtually the same way, but not everything's unchanged. "We're finding that gamers who played *Asylum* get themselves into a fight, but then stuff starts to happen that they didn't expect, and makes it a great experience and a great spectator sport," says Ginn. Primarily the animations are what strike me: even simply pointing Batman in the direction of an enemy and tapping the left mouse button repeatedly will treat you to an elaborately choreographed show of ass-kicking, making you feel like a ninja in exchange for minimal input. If you happen to be near a wall or rail, Batman transforms it into an instrument of justice by slamming a goon against it.

It's even smoother and more varied than



Urban decay has never looked so good.



Yup, definitely a bullet.



Thugs dress up to match their affiliated supervillain.

BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY

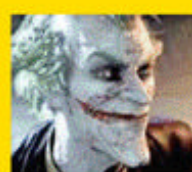
Catwoman's appearance is brief, but she makes quite an impression.

Detective Mode Batman can see your pelvis.

That guy's gonna get punched so good.

CITIZENS OF ARKHAM CITY

Batman's rogues are out in force



The Joker & Harley Quinn

The Joker's under the weather after the end of *Asylum*, but still dangerous.



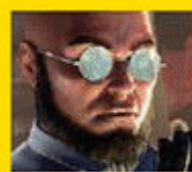
Two-Face

The former district attorney goes down like a chump early, but he might be back.



Penguin

Oswald Cobblepot is Arkham City's first resident, and collector of fine, heavy weaponry.



Dr. Strange

Somehow he's learned Batman's secret identity, and will use it against him.



Riddler

He's angry at Batman for humiliating him in the last game, and he's taking it out on Gotham.

Asylum's already-impressive brawling, and that's before you step it up a notch with a little careful timing and some of the new moves: like the grapple-clothesline, cape-stun leap-attack combo, rapid body-punches, and tricky double and triple counter-takedowns when multiple enemies attack at once. Batman becomes a whirling tornado of feet, fists, and gadgets that cuts a wide swath through the criminal element.

To the rescue

When the dust settles, the civilian turns out to be news reporter Jack Ryder, who DC comics fans will know. "When we put in these details and cameos, knowing full well that only three or four percent of people playing are going to get that, it's kind of exciting," says Ginn. "It's something that's super-obscure and exclusive."

Oh right: I should probably save Catwoman. I grapple-glide my way over to the courthouse and engage a gang of Two-Face's half 'n' half-masked thugs outside, giving me a chance to employ another of Bats' new takes on an old toy. I double-tap the 3 key, which drops a small explosive package on the ground, leap away, and double-tap 3 again to

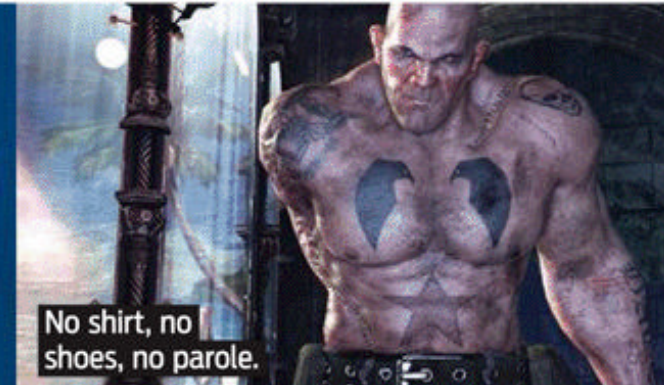
set off the bomb and knock everybody around it flat on their backs.

Inside the courthouse, the level design reverts to an *Asylum*-style controlled environment, with more references and subtle touches everywhere. The entire right side of the courthouse is sparkling clean while the left half is trashed, and I pass a locked-up Calendar Man. In the main courtroom, dozens of inmates—far more than were ever on screen at once in *Asylum*—are rallied to watch Two-Face put Catwoman on "trial." After stealthily removing the gunman overlooking the crowd, I walk over a highwire above the scene and drop directly into the middle of the group. In the ensuing battle, the not-so-subtle PhysX enhancement causes a wooden wall to splinter as inmates are flung against it.

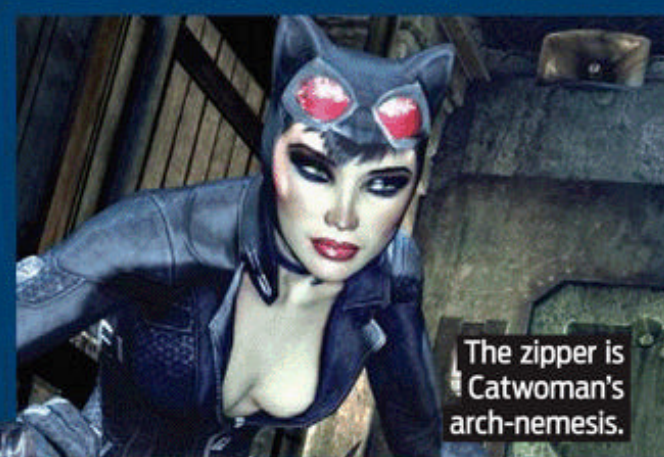
Two-Face waits for me to down the last henchmen, then gets in a (scripted) lucky shot that nails Batman's chest armor, leaving a (Harvey) dent near the bat emblem—the first of many signs of wear and tear the suit will endure as Batman takes punishment in the story. Catwoman then frees herself with the power of a bad pun, and Batman captures Two-Face. All of this has happened in a cutscene, so this



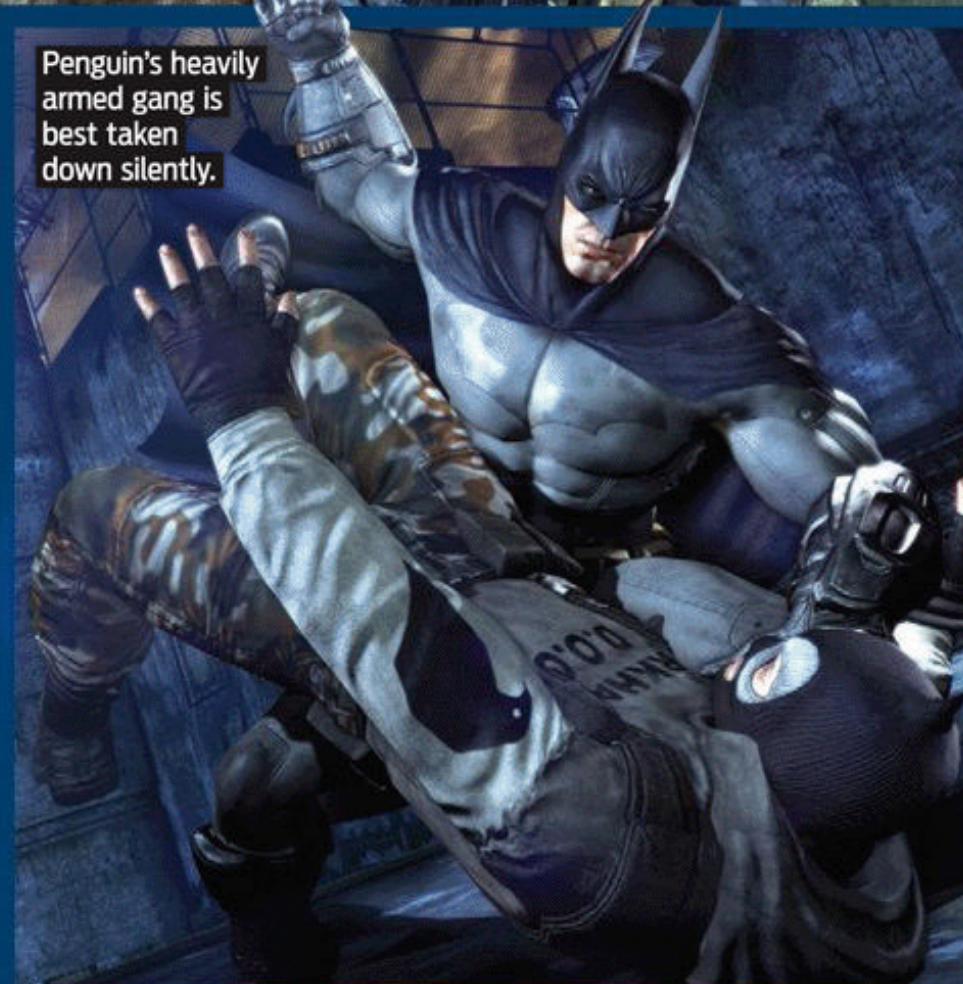
With Two-Face's crew, I'm not sure which face I should punch. Better punch both.



No shirt, no shoes, no parole.



The zipper is Catwoman's arch-nemesis.



Penguin's heavily armed gang is best taken down silently.

isn't much of a boss fight, but Ginn promises big things to come.

"Looking back at *Arkham Asylum*, we didn't put as much effort into the boss fights as we would've liked—they came into the development cycle late," he says, acknowledging the weakness of the repeated Batarang-to-the-face-of-the-charging-boss fights. "But we front-loaded a lot of the design for the boss fights early on in *Arkham City*. Having so many new villains in the game, and so many diverse personalities has helped us approach the design of the boss fights in a unique way."

The cutscene wraps up with Batman pulling Catwoman out of the line of fire as The Joker takes a sniper shot at her. Detective Vision on! The Joker's sniper shot is traced back to a clock tower across town, and I grapple-glide my way there in a jiff. A gang of Joker-themed armed thugs is waiting, along with Harley Quinn, who stays around just long enough to flaunt her new outfit. I throw down a new gadget—a smoke bomb—and grapple up to the gargoyles above for a Predator stealth sequence. It's the same game of Bat and Mouse, but with some new ninja-like takedowns: grabbing from under the floor panels, smack-

ing two heads together, and smashing through thin walls to grab an enemy.

Up in the tower where the shot originated, The Joker is a no-show—he'd been aiming the sniper rifle remotely, and the whole thing is rigged to blow. At the prompt, I dash for the window, and Batman dives through and glides away as an explosion rips the place apart.

Bat in a box

That's as far as Warner Bros. is willing to let me play in the story, but there's plenty more on the side. *Arkham City*'s littered with Riddler challenge trophies—over 400 of them—and Riddler has learned a few new techniques of hiding them. The first few I find are stashed behind breakable walls, inside cages linked to pressure pads, stuck to walls and ceilings, and behind a gate opened by an electrified, remote-controlled Batarang. You can now pick trophies up with the grapple, too, fixing one of *Asylum*'s little frustrations. When I'd grabbed a few, Riddler reveals the location of a hostage he's abducted and imperiled in a room full of whirling blades and electrified floors.

I'm switched to an Xbox 360 to do this challenge, which also gives me a chance to

see first-hand the differences between the two versions. Even ignoring the absence of DirectX 11 and PhysX effects (such as tessellation, fog, and more loose trash in the streets)—holy crap, do the console textures look poor by comparison. But I digress—this is the Riddler's best GLaDOS challenge chamber impersonation, with puzzles that required me to hack, run, tag targets with Batarangs, jump, duck under the blades, and use the zipline (which now allows a mid-swing 90-degree turn) to reach my goal.

For the last trick, I'm given a pair of Nvidia 3D Vision glasses. Thanks to the high-altitude gliding and swinging, the depth effects of 3D really stand out in *Arkham City*, though it does make a dark game look that much darker. If you've already invested in a 3D monitor and a beefy Nvidia GPU, playing this game will make you glad you did.

The game as a whole is coming together so well that it's really getting to be unfair to all the other superheroes. *Arkham Asylum* was a great environment for Batman, but this dilapidated, large-scale urban crime scene is The Dark Knight's true natural habitat. *Arkham City* is the Batman game we deserve. ■

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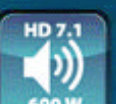
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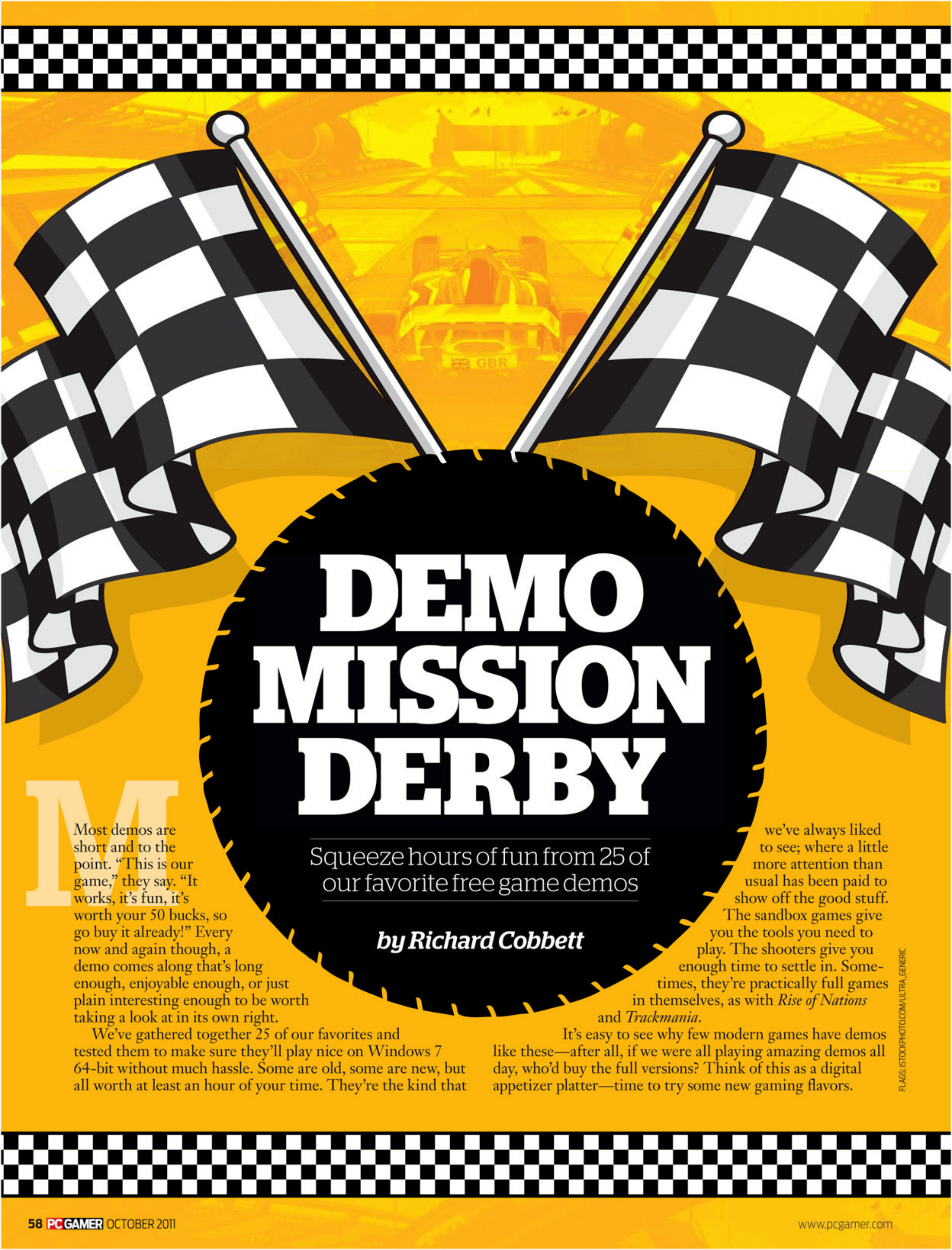
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DEMO MISSION DERBY

Squeeze hours of fun from 25 of our favorite free game demos

by Richard Cobbett

M

Most demos are short and to the point. "This is our game," they say. "It works, it's fun, it's worth your 50 bucks, so go buy it already!" Every now and again though, a demo comes along that's long enough, enjoyable enough, or just plain interesting enough to be worth taking a look at in its own right.

We've gathered together 25 of our favorites and tested them to make sure they'll play nice on Windows 7 64-bit without much hassle. Some are old, some are new, but all worth at least an hour of your time. They're the kind that

we've always liked to see; where a little more attention than usual has been paid to show off the good stuff. The sandbox games give you the tools you need to play. The shooters give you enough time to settle in. Sometimes, they're practically full games in themselves, as with *Rise of Nations* and *Trackmania*.

It's easy to see why few modern games have demos like these—after all, if we were all playing amazing demos all day, who'd buy the full versions? Think of this as a digital appetizer platter—time to try some new gaming flavors.

FLAGS: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/ULTRA_GENERIC



CRYSIS

SINGLE-PLAYER THE ORIGINAL SYSTEM-KILLER, AND NOW YOUR PC CAN PROBABLY EVEN RUN IT!

The *Crysis* demo itself is nothing special—just the first few fights in the game, and a taste of its still-pretty graphics. In the install folder though, you'll find the complete level editor (Sandbox2Installer), and this is where the fun really begins. We're not suggesting you actually build your own levels—just abuse the ability to drop whatever objects you like into the world. Huge tower of explosives? Sure. A few more vehicles? Presto! You can play around with its incredible physics and huge collection of props for as long as you like—just press CTRL-g to switch between editor mode and the actual game at will.

Game release date: November 2007
Download URL: <http://bit.ly/iAHB>
File Size: 1.7GB

Grab freedom by the balls, but Koreans by the throat. It's safer.



TORCHLIGHT

SINGLE-PLAYER THE LIGHT HACK 'N' SLASH THAT WON'T RUIN YOUR APPETITE FOR ADVENTURE

Treat yourself to two glorious hours of the most addictive, beautiful, *Diablo*-style game since *Diablo* itself. Picking one of three character classes, you dive into the endless, randomly generated labyrinths under the town of Torchlight, fighting armies of monsters, those pesky undead, and ultimately, the clock. Whether you go in close to smash things yourself, or hang back summoning pets and hurling magic, there's no way you're going to get tired of the action before the timer expires. At that point, buying the game lets you pick up right where you left off. Alternatively, treat it as a taster of what you can look forward to in *Torchlight II*.

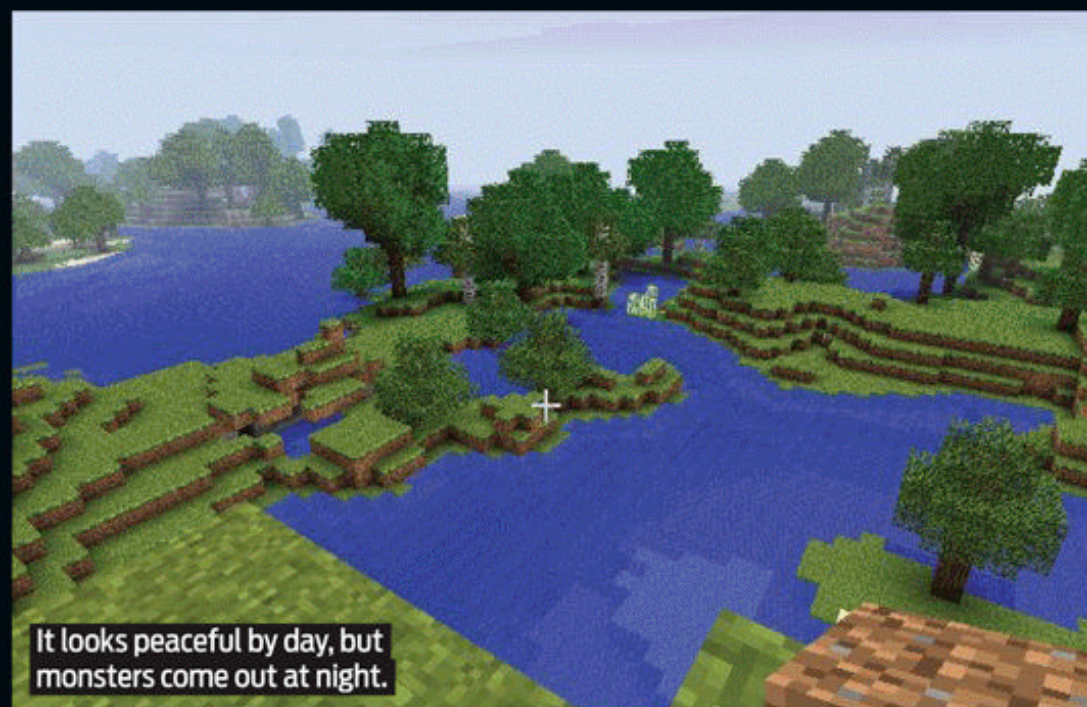
Game release date: October 2009 (Download), January 2010 (Retail)
Download URL: <http://bit.ly/PDF5Y>
File Size: 410MB

MINECRAFT

SINGLE-PLAYER BE THE KING OF YOUR OWN CASTLE, AS LONG AS YOU BUILD IT QUICKLY

Before now, your only chance for a *Minecraft* demo was the ancient *Classic Edition*. Forget it. With the specially made *PC Gamer* demo, you not only get stylishly branded sheep to turn into snacks for your first voyage, but five in-game days (an hour and 40 minutes of real time) to explore and survive in this beautiful, blocky, dangerous world. Head off in any direction to see the sights, but beware: monsters hide in the shadows. When you run out of time, don't worry—the world gets reset, but you can start the journey all over again. Don't forget to raid the treasure chest of goodies for both lunch and some starting supplies.

Game release date: November 2011
Download URL: <http://bit.ly/hjFiGI>
File Size: 4MB



DEMO MISSION DERBY

JUST CAUSE 2

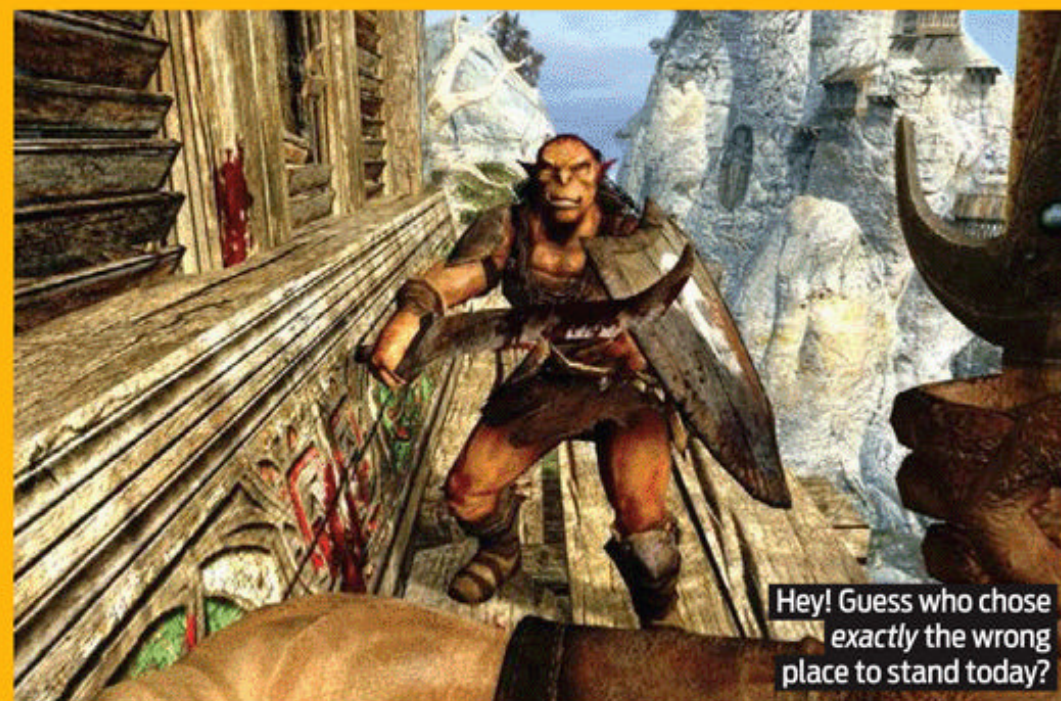
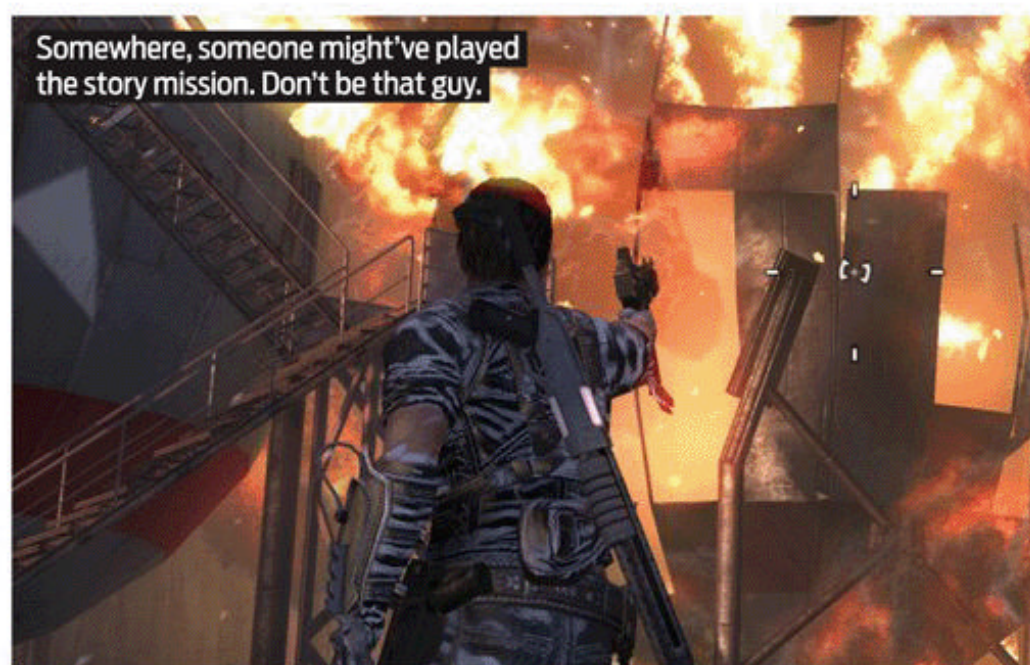
SINGLE-PLAYER GO CRAZY WITH A GRAPPLING HOOK ON A BEAUTIFUL TROPICAL ISLAND

Many games claim to be a sandbox, but *Just Cause 2* is one of the few that truly lives up to it. There's an official mission in this demo—you'll want to ignore that. Leap off the nearest cliff instead. Parachute across the majestic scenery. Discover the joy of roping two cars together and watching them smash. You might even venture online and find certain mod patches like *Bolo* (<http://m0.to/BOLOPatch>) that boost your amazing grappling hook to godlike levels of strength and prevent even the craziest stunts from killing you. The timer cuts you off after 30 minutes, but you can just restart and go crazy all over again.

Game release date: March 2010

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/9qeEIN>

File Size: 1GB



DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

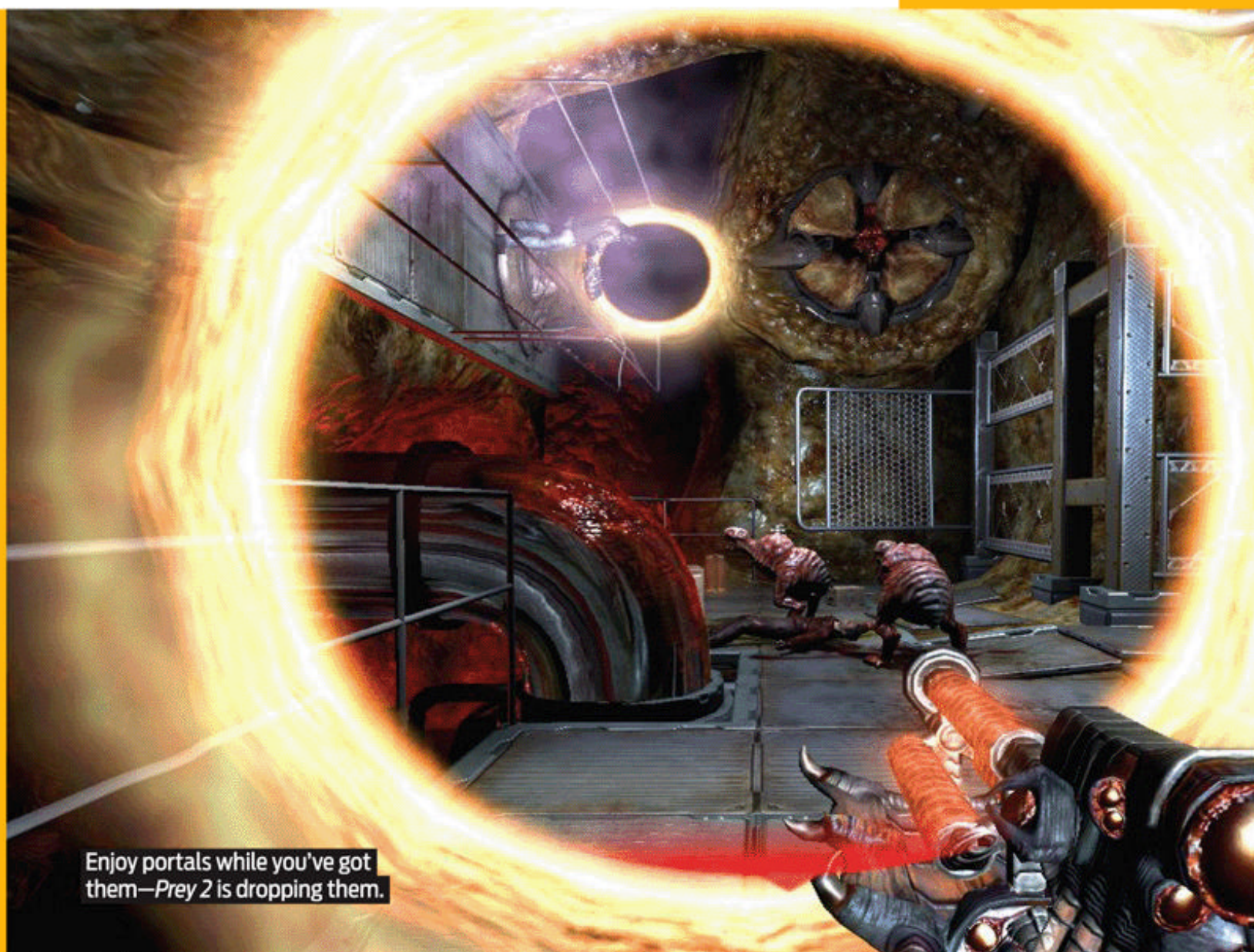
SINGLE-PLAYER WHO CARES ABOUT SAVING THE WORLD IN A PSYCHOPATH'S PLAYGROUND?

Kick orcs into spikes! Smash crates into your enemies! Play an hour of some of the most enjoyable melee combat around. *Dark Messiah* as a whole may be underwhelming, but the heft and satisfaction of getting up close and personal hasn't been done much better since. Other games may let you boot enemies in the ass, but few are so generous about positioning them next to high cliffs and giant walls studded with spikes—the interaction between the two will make you fall in love with physics all over again. Best of all, none of the full game's horrific giant spiders show up to spoil the fun.

Game release date: October 2006

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/cOZYp>

File Size: 1.4GB



PREY

SINGLE-PLAYER REMEMBER THAT OTHER FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER WITH PORTALS IN IT?

The full game unfortunately suffers from front-loading most of the best parts, but that's okay—that's the part that's in the demo. *Prey* gets off to an amazing start, from the coolest alien invasion ever (spot them loading a copy of "Don't Fear the Reaper" into a bar jukebox just to have awesome background music for the abduction) to the insane gravity-bending and portal puzzles of the earliest areas. It's worth playing just to see what someone other than Valve can do with portal technology.

Game release date: July 2006

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/gbeYIB>

File Size: 450MB

HALF-LIFE: UPLINK

SINGLE-PLAYER AS CLOSE AS YOU'RE GOING TO GET TO A NEW *HALF-LIFE* EPISODE ANYTIME SOON

Remember when nobody knew how good *Half-Life* was going to be? Relive those days of discovery with *Uplink*, which is both a demo of the original and an independent chapter of content not seen in the full game. It's a short mission in which Gordon tries to send a radio signal; but in that time there is plenty of fighting against the soldiers that impressed everyone so much back in the day—and even have a run-in with one of the boss monsters. Bonus: After playing, look up “*Half-Life Uplink*” on YouTube to see the god-awful live-action film that nearly made the series a laughing stock before it even released.

Game release date: November 1998, February 1999 (*Uplink*)

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/dsjEp2>

File Size: 50MB

Trouble getting it to run? Set Compatibility Mode to Windows 98.



GRID

SINGLE-PLAYER SLIGHTLY MORE REALISTIC THAN BUMPER CARS, AND JUST AS FUN

GRID sits in the middle of the racing simulation world. It's got the bashy-crashy action of arcade style racers, with just enough of the higher-end options, car modeling, and realism to make it feel like something a little more than that. This demo offers three races—or, looking at it another way, three opportunities to dive headlong into traffic and practice your ridiculous drifting skills in front of an army of cheering spectators. For comedic effect, try practically totaling your car near the start of the round, and enjoy the narration telling you how even with one wheel falling off you're still doing well by beating your last time. He even sounds genuine.

Game release date: June 2008

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/dTROae>

File Size: 915MB

Wheel's off, bumper's trailing, window's smashed... but you can do it!



Return to the hangar that kicked off a whole new genre.

DOOM: KNEE-DEEP IN THE DEAD

SINGLE-PLAYER/MULTI-PLAYER TAKE A TRIP BACK TO THE PAST, WHEN HELL WAS STILL COOL

Doom. If you've never played it, you owe it to yourself to do so. If you played it, but haven't for a long time, good news! Unlike most 20-year-old shooters, it's still worthy. This first episode is a master class in great (albeit simple) level design, the shotgun remains a thing of beauty, and while the iconic monsters may look like angry blobs of giant pixels, the satisfaction of blasting them to awesome music hasn't paled. If you can't handle the resolution, or want easier access to the online action that gave us the word Deathmatch, consider downloading an updated open-source version of the engine such as *Doomsday* or *JDoom*.

Game release date: December 1993

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/eyU8ZZ>

File Size: 2.3MB

ARMA 2: OPERATION ARROWHEAD

SINGLE-/MULTI-PLAYER THE WAR BETWEEN REALISM AND SILLINESS BEGINS HERE—CHOOSE YOUR SIDE

Played straight, *Arma 2* is the best realistic combat game around, offering authentic battle and gripping squad-based multiplayer. Alternatively, it's one of the best go-wild-in-a-jeep games ever. Vanilla *Arma 2* has gone free-to-play (grab that at www.arma2.com/free), but that version doesn't come with all of the most recent military hardware found in the *Operation Arrowhead* demo, such as the M32 semi-automatic grenade launcher, the Javelin missile launcher, and the F-35 fighter jet. Perhaps best of all, the demo comes with access to the mission editor, allowing you to mess around with the gear on offer.

Game release date: June 2010

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/bLwiEz>

File Size: 2.8GB



If that chicken even *thinks* about crossing the road, it'll be the last thing he ever does.

DEMO MISSION DERBY

X-COM: UFO DEFENSE

SINGLE-PLAYER THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE—AND THE TRUTH IS ALIEN INVADERS

Ask almost any strategy fan to name the greatest turn-based game ever, and you'll hear one name again and again: *X-COM*. This demo gives you a small squad of tooled-up troops and a single tactical terror mission to find out why. It's a particularly nasty one—it's a nighttime mission against Snakemen and the absolutely evil Chryssalids, but your biggest foe will be the brutal, 1994-style interface—if you have difficulty, try watching a Let's Play video (<http://bit.ly/xcomlp>). The sheer tension of the aliens taking their turns, moving around in the shadows is no less effective now than it was 15 years ago. Note: you'll need to download DOSBox (www.dosbox.com) and drag XCOM.bat onto the DOSBox desktop shortcut to run it.

Game release date: December 1993
Download URL: <http://bit.ly/gPf5dR>
File Size: 1.44MB

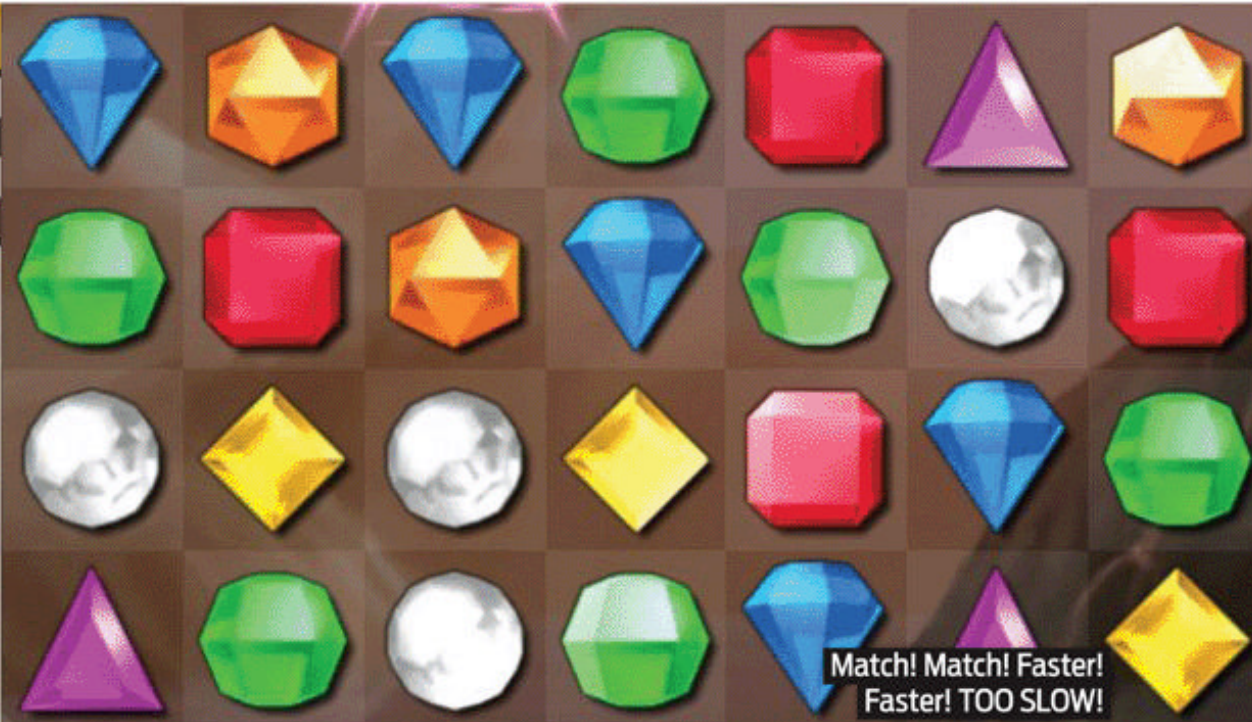


DEUS EX

SINGLE-PLAYER A SECOND CHANCE TO BOW BEFORE THE GOD OF PLAYER FREEDOM

Rarely challenged, never beaten. Technically, this demo is *Deus Ex*'s first mission and debriefing, but in reality it's so much more. The Statue of Liberty has been taken over by terrorists, and it's completely up to you how to get it back. Use stealth? Deploy the rocket launcher? Find allies? You can play at least three times without repeating yourself. While the graphics and feel haven't aged well, there's one very important reason to play this demo now: so you're ready to play *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (reviewed on page 68). Judge for yourself if it lives up to the ambition and standards of its name; it's part of your civic duty as a PC gamer.

Game release date: June 2003
Download URL: <http://bit.ly/f6fANM>
File Size: 139MB



BEJEWELED BLITZ

SINGLE-PLAYER A GEM OF A PUZZLE GAME. PLAY IT NOW. THE CLOCK'S TICKING

Bejeweled: match colored gems to make points. *Bejeweled Blitz*: same thing, but you've got 60 seconds. The *Bejeweled Blitz* demo: 60 minutes. You do the math. How many demos can you burn through 60 times and still crave more? It's the most addictive version of the game ever, and it makes up for the lack of *Bejeweled* 3's mini-game variety with a blazing-fast pace, Facebook integration, and the creeping fear of your friends and family beating your high score. You don't want to let them do that, do you? No, you want to crush them.

Game release date: April 2010
Download URL: <http://bit.ly/hpw6ml>
File Size: 60MB

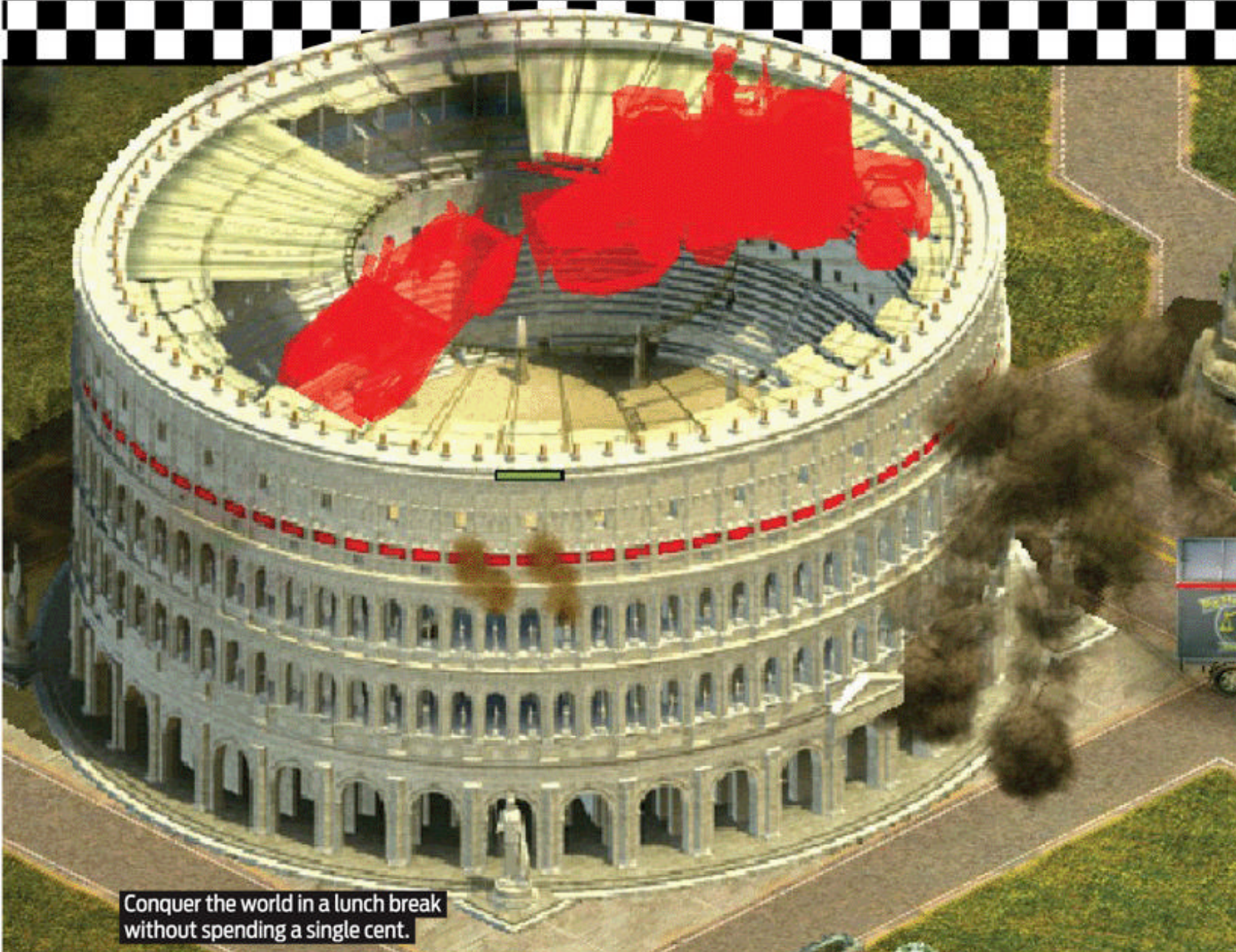
SPORE CREATURE CREATOR

SINGLE-PLAYER ALL THE BEST PARTS OF WILL WRIGHT'S MAGNUM OPUS, YET NONE OF THE GAME

Not many games could get away with just releasing a character creator as a demo, much less charging money for a version with a few extra body parts. *Spore* is different, though. Whether you loved, hated, or simply yawned at the full game, making your own life forms by clicking pieces together remains an incredible and creative experience. If you can imagine it (and it has legs and is mostly symmetrical) you can build it. It may be pointless in the long run, but it's fun. If you need to wrap it in some greater purpose, just pretend you're God doodling on a notepad between miracles. You can't do worse than the platypus.

Game release date: September 2008
Download URL: <http://bit.ly/2MtqOl>
File Size: 206MB





RISE OF NATIONS

SINGLE-PLAYER A CIVILIZED WAY TO DO BATTLE THROUGHOUT HISTORY

How appropriate that one of the most underrated games in the mold of *Age of Empires* and *Civilization* should also be one of the most amazing strategy demos ever. With four of the full game's civilizations to choose from, four different map styles to see what they can do, and the complete technology tree at your disposal, it's practically a whole game. Feel pride in your society as you build it up from a simple village into the ultimate warrior nation—without getting buried in the deep stats and turn-based economics of a full round of *Civ 5*. There's no multiplayer action in the demo, unfortunately, but you can skirmish as much as you like against up to seven AIs at once.

Game release date: May 2003

Download URL: <http://cnet.co/empRtl>

File Size: 194MB

Conquer the world in a lunch break without spending a single cent.



In which a giant lion poops on a villager's head.

BLACK & WHITE 2

SINGLE-PLAYER TREAT YOUR PET GIANT LION TO AN ALL-IT-CAN-EAT VILLAGER BUFFET

Skip past the tutorial mission and *Black & White 2* will set you and your lovable idiot creature loose on an island full of bored villagers just looking for a divine being to worship and/or be murdered by. The first playthrough is for winning by impressing the non-believers with a spectacular town until they convert. The second is for arming your people for military conquest and marching on the heathens. The remaining hours are spent terrorizing people with fireballs and lightning; slapping your creature silly; teaching it to eat people and poop on things; and of course, setting that poop on fire and flinging it around the island.

Game release date: October 2005

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/bnw2demo>

File Size: 617MB

MOUNT & BLADE: WARBAND

SINGLE-PLAYER RIDE INTO BATTLE IN SEARCH OF THAT RPG DEPTH YOU CRAVE

Bored of simply following someone else's story? *Mount & Blade* is an epic roleplaying sandbox, giving you enough scope to build an empire and run around on your own, playing with weapons modeled with full physics. It's not the prettiest game, but you won't find many that give you the same feeling of being in control. The trial version lets you get your character to Level 7—plenty of time to run amok in the world, pillaging and looting every town you come across. After all, you'll be moving on to the next demo before you have to face the consequences of your actions.

Game release date: March 2010

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/JT6e>

File Size: 580MB



Learn to fight, and then turn those skills on defenseless villagers.



DEMO MISSION DERBY

TRACKMANIA NATIONS FOREVER

SINGLE AND MULTIPLAYER PUT THE PEDAL TO THE METAL AND TAKE YOUR HAND OFF YOUR WALLET

Most generous demo ever? *Trackmania Nations Forever* doesn't just let you play it as much as you like. It doesn't just give you 65 tracks to drive on. It doesn't just give you a multiplayer mode to test yourself against others. No, it gives you a full level editor, making the "forever" part of the name more than just a snappy bit of marketing. The only real limitation is you only get one environment to drive in (the standard stadium), but with these crazy acrobatic tracks, you're not going to care. If you crave more variety, the full *Trackmania* is cheap. If not, you can drive to your heart's content, online and off, from here to eternity.

Game release date: April 2008

Download URL: www.trackmaniaforever.com/nations

File Size: 518MB



AVERNUM VI

SINGLE-PLAYER HEAD DOWN, DOWN, DEEPER AND DEEPER, INTO ADVENTURE

If you love RPGs, you're missing out by not giving Jeff Vogel's a try. What they lack in graphical splendor (which is everything), they more than make up for in scale and imagination. His two big series are *Geneforge* (shaping new life to serve you) and *Avernum*, an epic series about a sprawling underground empire. We'd recommend that, simply because it's the most recent. The demo alone will give you hours of dungeon crawling fun, and don't worry about joining the series late—number six is a stand-alone story, with a brand-new cast of heroes to lead to victory, and everything you need to know about the world is explained at the start.

Game release date: March 2010

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/WtCMq>

File Size: 31MB

So it doesn't look like *The Witcher 2*. If you squint, it's still epic!



DESTROY THE HOSTILE SHIPS



FREELANCER

SINGLE-PLAYER ANOTHER CHANCE TO PROVE YOURSELF AN ELITE SPACE TRADER

The last game from *Wing Commander* creator Chris Roberts brought us a huge, sprawling mix of *Elite/Privateer*-style trading and all-out space combat. The demo starts you off with the story missions and tutorial (listen for the voice of female Commander Shepard), but after you've defended a convoy and destroyed a raider space station it doesn't eject you back to Windows; it cuts you loose and allows you to explore an entire star system at will. It's a huge chunk of space, with several planets to visit, commodities to trade and random bounty missions to run.

Game release date: March 2003

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/flancedemo>

File Size: 147MB

DESCENT

SINGLE-/MULTI-PLAYER DOWN, DOWN, DEEPER AND DEEPER, INTO A WHOLE NEW DIMENSION

Try a corridor shooter of a different kind—one where you're not a hulking space marine, but a spaceship. You get to bank and weave and dodge as you hunt down keys and take on robots, with the most exciting bit coming at the end of every level: a desperate escape before the exploding reactor you just blasted takes you out along with everything else. This was one of the last great shareware game demos, giving you such a huge chunk of the game that most people found it more than enough by itself—that's probably why the sequel's demo cut it down to just a couple of levels.

Game release date: March 1995

Download URL: <http://cnet.co/9D0qrk>

File Size: 3MB



POSTAL 2

SINGLE-PLAYER GO TO THE STORE, BUY SOME MILK. WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

When you've had a bad day, there's nothing like picking up a can of gas and a pack of matches and doing what comes naturally. Try that in reality and you're going to jail for a long time. Do it in *Postal 2* and you're just scraping the surface of its sadistic little sandbox. The full game quickly descends into chaos, with terrorists and other enemies just getting in your way. Here, the world has nothing to fear but you yourself—for seven minutes at a time, anyway. Break into houses, grab anything that's not nailed down, and cut loose. Or, if you prefer, calmly walk to the store and buy a bottle of milk. Your choice.

Game release date: April 2003

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/eTAHWG>

File Size: 123MB



It's a PC game. Unless you mean "Politically Correct," in which case...

TRON 2.0

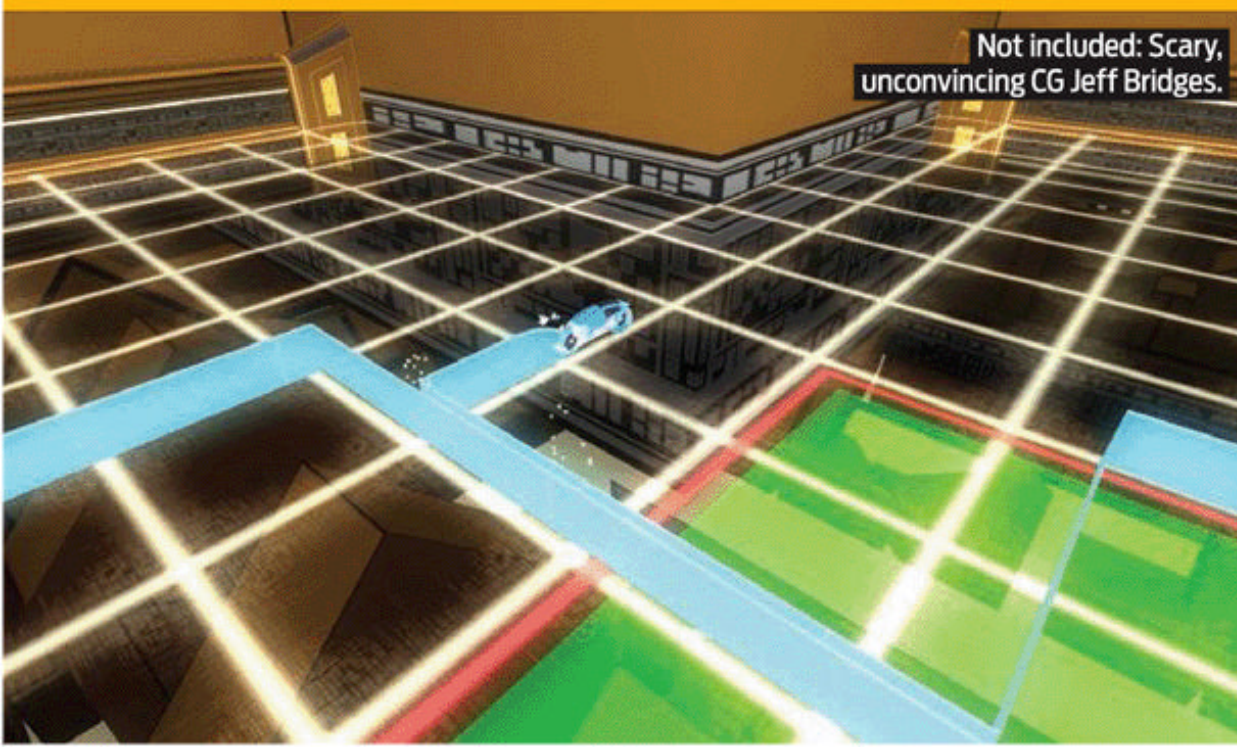
MULTIPLAYER THE USERS HAVE GONE. THIS TIME, YOU'RE FIGHTING FOR YOURSELF

Quick! Name the two most awesome parts of *Tron*. Did you say the disc-throwing game and lightcycles? Correct! Now guess what the *Tron 2.0* demo lets you play as much as you like. The single-player game is largely tedious, and the snippet of it here isn't even worth looking at. Grab a friend or three, though, and you can race and hurl magic Frisbees at collapsing floors as much as you want. You'll need to be on the same LAN—the internet servers have long since shut down—but a wireless connection will be fine, and almost any modern laptop, netbook, or wristwatch can handle the game. Think of the blockiness as a bit of added retro charm.

Game release date: August 2003

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/gc7tJM>

File Size: 207MB



Not included: Scary, unconvincing CG Jeff Bridges.



It's like *StarCraft II*, but without the II.

STARCRAFT

SINGLE-/MULTI-PLAYER A TERRAN, A PROTOSS, AND A ZERG WALK BACK INTO YOUR HEART

Finished *StarCraft II*? Want more, but don't dare go online and have the illusion of competence forever shattered? Original *StarCraft* may not be as shiny, but Blizzard was so hesitant to deviate from its winning formula in the sequel that going back is surprisingly easy. Where better to start than with this special demo-exclusive campaign, featuring three Terran missions (plus a quick tutorial) that set up the main game's storyline? There's even multiplayer included, though you can be grateful that the lobby will inevitably be empty. You don't want to fight anyone who's still playing the first game after all this time—they've likely evolved into some kind of Zerg-rushing energy being by now. Definitely stick to LAN play with a similarly inexperienced friend, or *StarCraft II* and its matchmaking.

Game release date: March 1998

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/FTcloX>

File Size: 28MB

HOMEWORLD

SINGLE-PLAYER ANY VOYAGE THROUGH SPACE BEGINS WITH A SINGLE JUMP—OF MANY LIGHT YEARS

Shock science update: space is three dimensional. You wouldn't think it from most space games, or most shows like *Star Trek*, where everyone seems to think the universe is flat. *Homeworld* is the first great game to understand that (and one of the last), with its *Battlestar Galactica*-inspired race through the stars, and ships streaming spaghetti-style engine trails in one of the most beautiful depictions of space ever. This demo contains a quick tutorial to show you the ropes, then two full missions to let you witness the awe-inspiring scale of real space strategy. Alternatively, look for the *Homeworld: Cataclysm* demo (<http://bit.ly/hmwrlcata>), which also gives you a cut-down version of the AI skirmish mode.

Game release date: September 1999

Download URL: <http://bit.ly/hLLTNv>

File Size: 64MB



"This is Giant Space Banana, you are cleared to dock."

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Need to know

What is it?

A first- and third-person action RPG where you play a cyborg super-agent uncovering a conspiracy by sneaking, shooting, punching, and hacking

Influenced by

Thief, *Rainbow Six: Vegas*

Play it on

2GHz dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce GTX260 /Radeon HD 5850

Alternatively

BioShock (91%)

Copy protection

Steam

***Deus Ex: Human Revolution* is the best game I've played in four years.**

SECOND COMING



Recapturing the spirit of the original, **DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION** is a once-in-a-decade game *by Tom Francis*

Adam Jensen, the perfect cyborg, is wrestling with a vending machine. It's not refusing to serve him an orange soda, it's refusing to fit through a door.

He is, as I play him, the worst chief of security in the world. He works for Sarif Industries, a futuristic company that makes robotic arms, and indeed the company who gave Adam his pair of robot arms after he failed to protect the company from a major assault and got himself shot in the head. (Why this caused his arms to fall off is not yet clear.)

Jensen finally gets the vending machine out onto the roof. He has a plan: "Maybe if I throw this vending machine off the roof..." The plan ends there.

He's inside gang territory, trying to make it to a door at street level. He decides to use the surprising devel-

opment of a vending machine falling out of the sky to distract the gangsters, so that he can drop down and get to the door without attracting attention. A sort of *Pepsi ex machina*.

He blindly hurls it across the street, then tumbles off the building. His Icarus Landing System kicks in, floating him safely to Earth in a dazzling ball of golden light.

When the vending machine crashes to the ground, the armed gangsters below all look at it in surprise. Then they look at the dazzling ball of golden light floating down the other side of the street, and draw their guns.

Jensen gets up, looks at them for a moment, and dives for cover. As he draws his custom-modded silenced 10mm pistol, the nearest gangster walks over, looks down at him and says, "Hey. Get lost."

Jensen holsters his gun and walks sheepishly to the door. His ridiculous plan had been completely unneces-

sary, but the fact that he'd been allowed to conceive and execute it at all is a rare and precious thing.

In love with the Ex

The *Deus Ex* games are first-person shooter roleplaying games that let you approach your objectives in any way that suits you: direct violence if you enjoy it, stealth if you don't, and throwing heavy objects around if you like getting caught, beaten, and shot. The first *Deus Ex*, released way back in 2000, is still considered by me and a lot of *PC Gamer* readers to be the best game ever made.

Human Revolution is a prequel: a global conspiracy thriller set at a time when replacing your body parts with high-tech prosthetics is a violently controversial new trend. It is, I guess I should mention, the best game I've played in four years.

The main thing *Human Revolution* gets right is giving you options: every mission is a labyrinth that gives you

Make something of yourself

How your first three augs can define you

The Closer



One leg upgrade increases your sprint speed, and two lung upgrades let you sprint far longer. Combine these with the ability to take out two guards at once in melee, and you're a hard man to stop.

The Investigator



The Social Aug lets you persuade characters to tell you more about your missions and their stories. Hacking upgrades let you get into everyone's email and read all their secrets, relationships, and precious door codes.

The Infiltrator



Smart Vision lets you see computer terminals through walls: use it to find a security hub, cloak past the guards, then hack it and turn the bots and turrets in the area to your side.

The Destroyer



Heavy weapons like the minigun have a lot of kick, but you can eliminate it with an arm upgrade. They also take a hell of a lot of inventory space, which you can expand with Strength. The Typhoon upgrade lets you blow up anyone who gets close.

The Explorer



Doubling your jump height and removing fall damage makes exploring the game's cities a pleasure, and being able to move stuff like vending machines gets you into otherwise inaccessible vents.

myriad ways to get to your objective. The pleasure of that freedom is that it leaves major elements like pacing, challenge, and variety up to the player. If stealth gets too hard, you can find an easier route. If you're bored of crawling through cliché man-sized vents, you can open fire. And if your ears are still ringing from the last gunfight, you can slip through the next area quietly.

These are just the routes the developers planned for. The soul of *Deus Ex* is in its systems: simple sets of rules with no scripting, no exceptions, and no accounting for what the player might do with them. *Human Revolution* has that exact system, letting you pick up and manipulate certain objects. The slick, surprisingly natural third-person cover system lets you hide behind any vertical surface—including the ones you've placed there yourself, lending to all sorts of mischief. I once built a hilariously conspicuous secrecy fort of boxes around a security terminal before hacking it to hide my crime.

Thinking behind the box

You can also pick up and move turrets. I called mine Gunther. I was only able to get to his control console by shuffling past him behind a cardboard box—I'd move it a few feet closer to him each time he turned away, then hide behind it when he looked back. Once I hacked into his controls, he was my friend for life. (Hacking, by the way, is immediately smarter and more involved than in any previous game.) Then I sat him at the top of a ramp to pelt fire at a whole gang while I snuck up behind them. When a guard destroyed him a few fights later, it hurt—because I was using him as cover at the time.

Like *Deus Ex*, *Human Revolution* is a linear series of levels. Also like *Deus Ex*, the levels themselves feel like real places. When there's a facility to infiltrate, it feels like a real building, with multiple floors and wings to explore in whatever order you like.

There are two differences in their approaches. The positive one is the city hubs: both games have large,

open urban areas you return to after several missions. *Human Revolution's* are bigger, more complex, and far richer in activities and secrets.

The negative one is more subtle. Quite a few missions in *Deus Ex*, including the famous first level on Liberty Island, let you explore the grounds of the mission location before entering the main building. Only a couple in *Human Revolution* do this, so it doesn't always have that same dizzying level of freedom the original occasionally did.

There are two other areas where *Human Revolution* doesn't entirely pull off what the original did. Firstly, the direct approach is a little too effective. While there are bots and turrets to hack, gas barrels to blow, and photocopiers to throw at people, subversion and improvisation are rarely the *best* ways out of a situation. The effectiveness of a silenced pistol shot to the face can undermine the pleasure of coming up with a brilliantly convoluted solution.

The last problem only comes up four times in the whole game, but it's an odd one: boss fights. They're terrible, and they can't be avoided. The game is so conflicted about this that there's even a Steam achievement for completing it without killing anyone, which apologetically adds that boss fights don't count. Yes they do, guys.

Killing under cover

That's it—those are the only three things that really bothered me. If all *Human Revolution* did was capture that much of *Deus Ex's* genius, with so few flaws, it'd be incredible. But we're only just getting started.

The cover system immediately improves the two main things you spend your time doing: hiding and shooting. *Deus Ex* made stealth viable by making enemies hilariously short-sighted; *Human Revolution* makes it viable by pulling out to third person every time you hold the cover key to hug a wall. It shows you exactly which directions you're hidden from, and lets you see out from your hiding spot without exposing yourself. It's not realistic, but it means stealth works all the way through a game where enemies are sharp, aggressive, and can kill you in a second.

Combat then becomes a tough-but-polished cover shooter. You can

Dealing with Ezekiel

Terrorist Zeke has taken Josie Thorpe hostage. These are your options (minor spoilers!)

1. Let him go

The easy option is to let Zeke here leave with Josie, but there are armed guards outside. It's not likely to end well for either of them.

2. Talk him down

If you say just the right things, you can talk him into letting Josie go in exchange for a safe escape. Both he and Josie can help you out later.

3. Knock him out

If you manage to taze him before he can shoot Josie, she'll be safe. You'll find Zeke in jail later, swearing he'll get out. It's up to you what to do about that.

4. Kill him

If you're a good shot, you can kill Zeke before he hurts Josie. Almost everyone sees it as justified, and Zeke's body shows up in the morgue later.

5. Knock Josie out

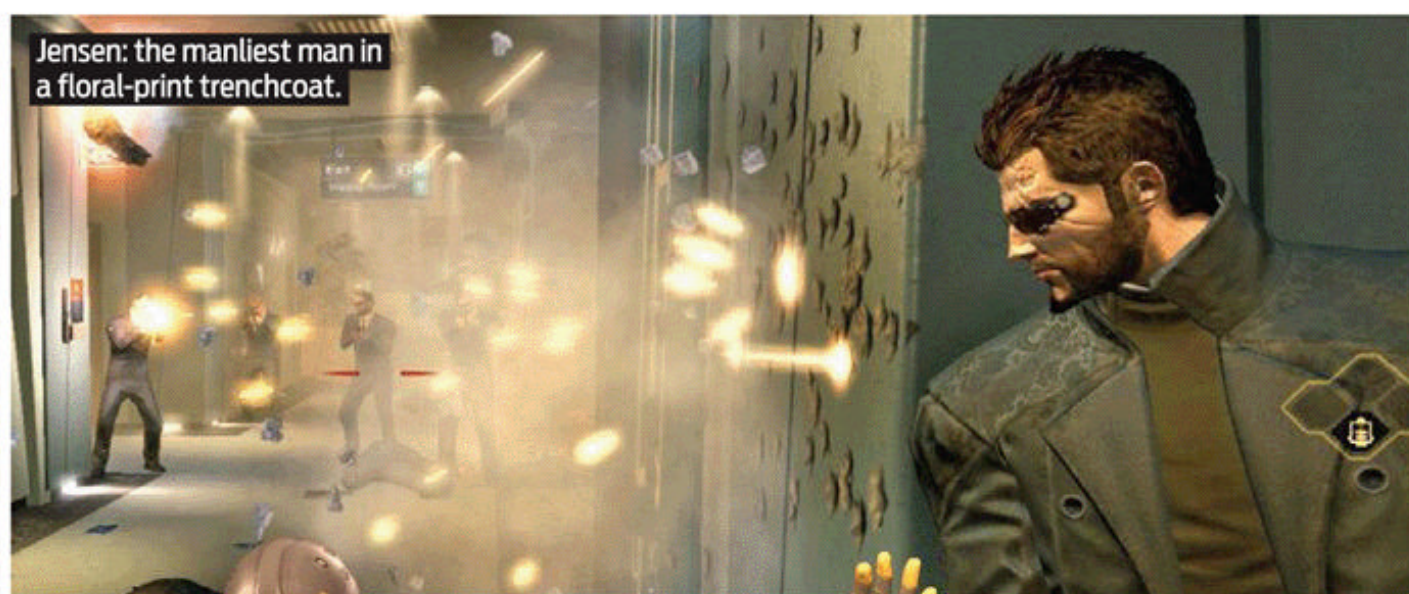
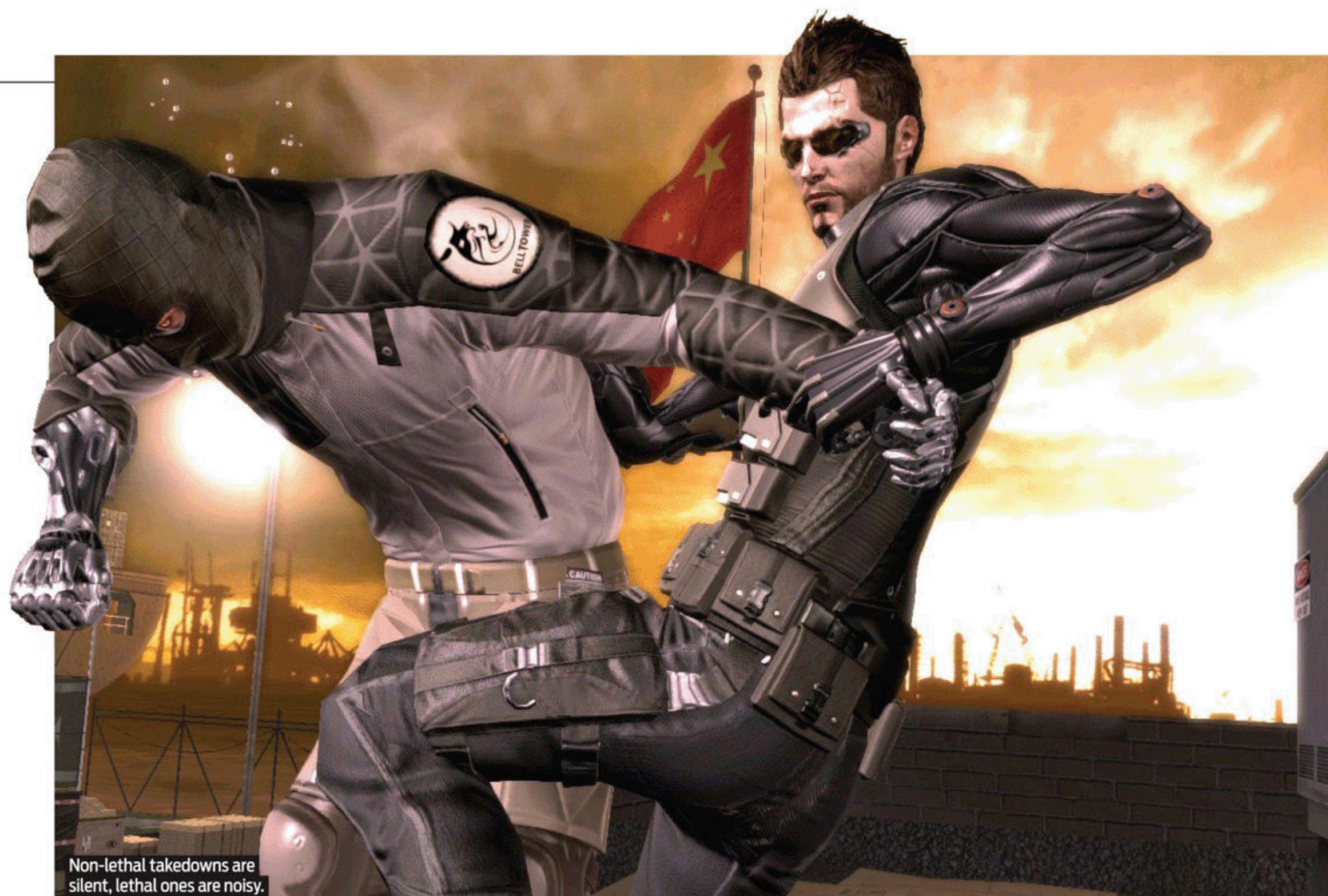
An unconventional approach: knock out the hostage and Zeke is too surprised and confused to do anything but defend himself from you.

6. Kill Josie

Or "the psycho option." It'll certainly shock Zeke, but don't be surprised if Josie's husband doesn't see this as a satisfactory solution.



I once built a hilariously conspicuous box fort around a security terminal to hide my crime.

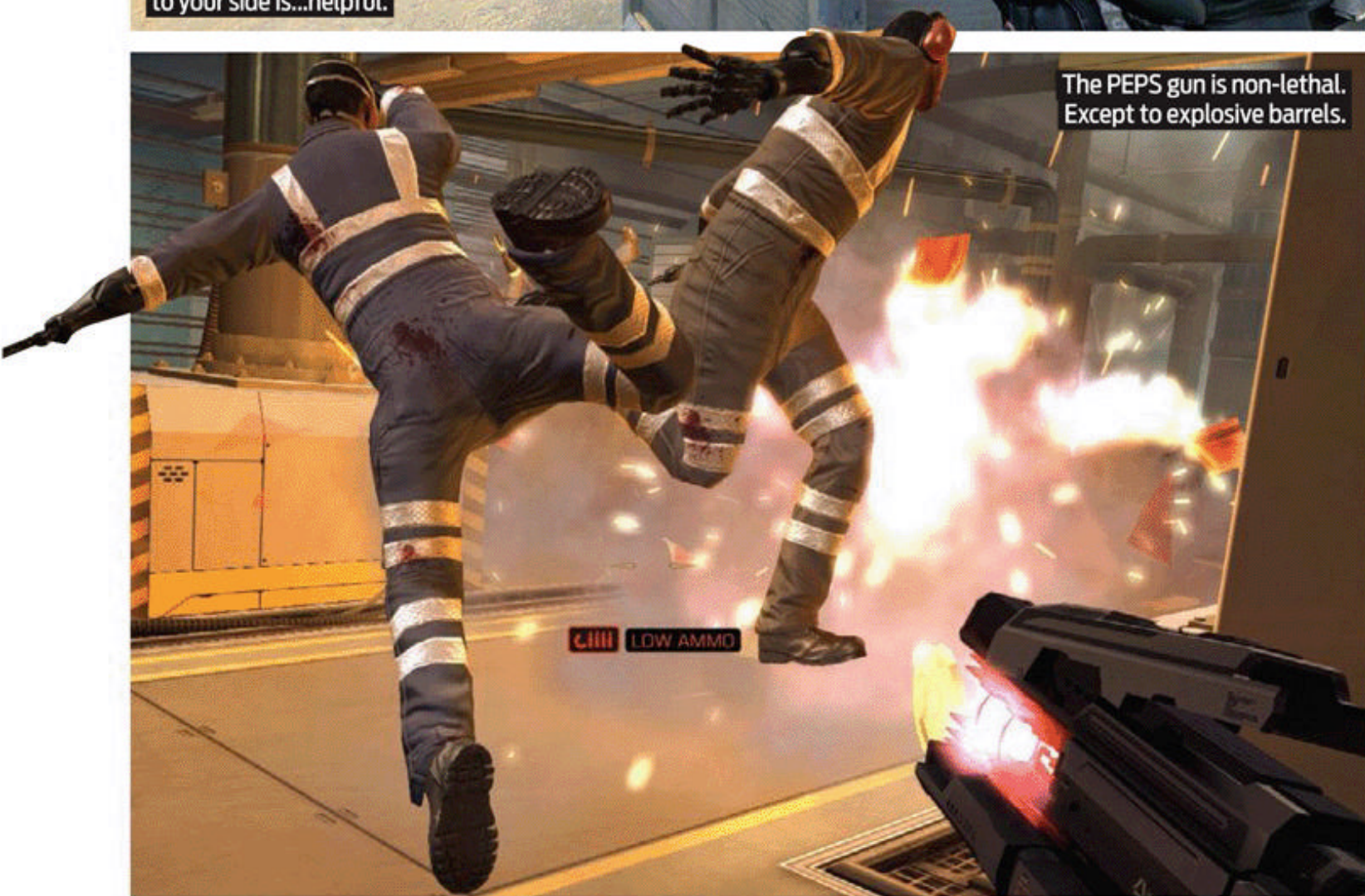




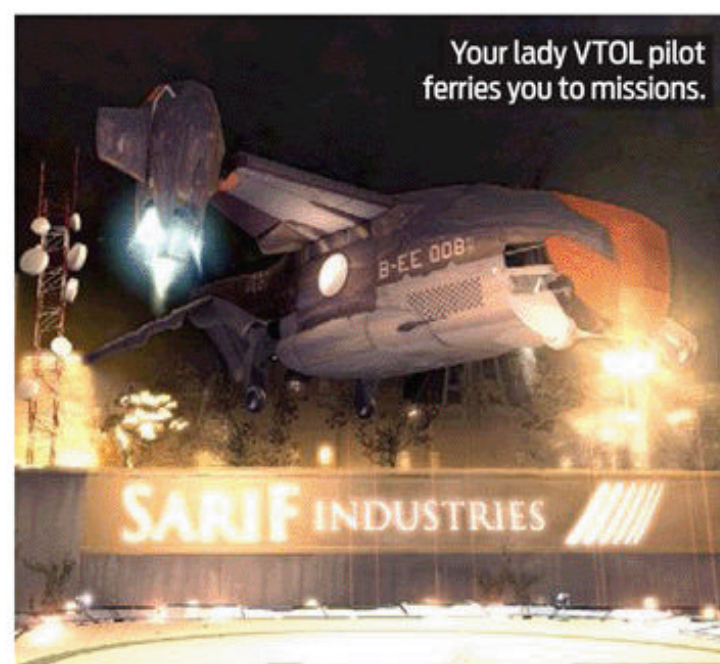
Hacking one of these bots to your side is...helpful.



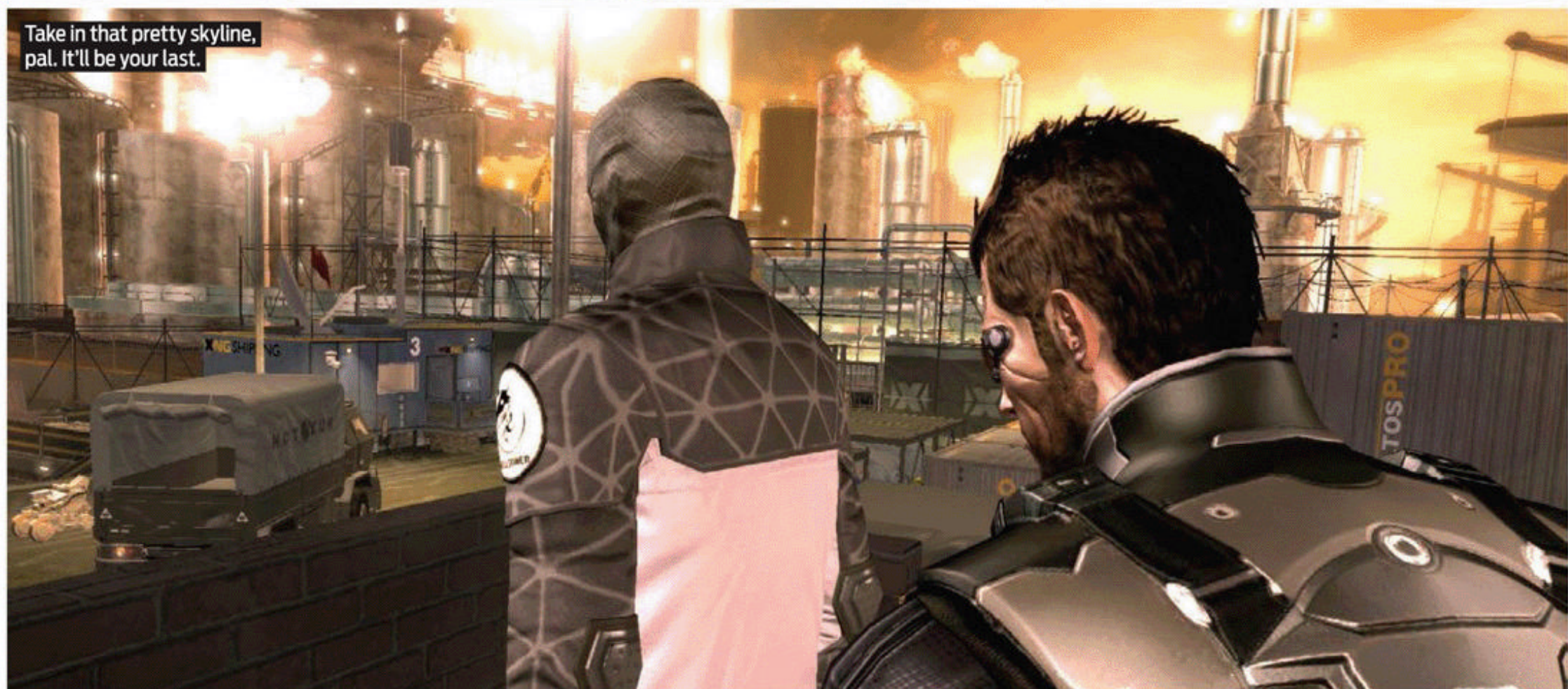
The revolver's explosive rounds mod: yes.



The PEPS gun is non-lethal. Except to explosive barrels.



Your lady VTOL pilot ferries you to missions.



Take in that pretty skyline, pal. It'll be your last.

blind-fire or peer out for an accurate shot, and enemies intelligently find their own hiding spots and do the same. Almost every weapon feels punchy and satisfying—particularly the spectacular knockback of the non-lethal PEPS gun—and there's a lot to choose from for any play style.

Learning to cyber

Augmentations make both combat and stealth more interesting. With the right stealth upgrades, you can see the fields of vision of everyone nearby on your minimap, the radius of every suspicious sound made, and the positions of all nearby enemies and security terminals. I honestly had more fun with a stealth approach in *Human Revolution* than with all of *Splinter Cell: Conviction*. It's heart-skippingly tense, deliciously high-tech, and slick to control.

Combat augs cater to a lot of different styles, but melee is where it gets fun. Any time you're close to an enemy and have at least one cell of energy—your aug-fuel—you can kill or knock them out with the press of a button. In third person, Jensen does swift, forceful, terrible things to them with his robot fists—or his robot fist-chisels, if you've held the button down for an execution. I'm not sure what it says about me, but I ended up finding these moments of pain-porn the most enduringly satisfying and hilarious interaction in the game. When that takedown involves physically picking one guard up and throwing him on top of the other to skewer them both with one stab...this might be my entire concept of fun.

In general, decisions about how to upgrade yourself are agonizing. It's like picking a superpower—each one of the 60-odd options seems like it would solve all of life's problems. Cyber lungs or X-ray vision? Think of the possibilities. One even helps with the conversation system, scanning brains and releasing pheromones to make you more persuasive.

Talk angry to me

With or without those augmentations, dialog in *Human Revolution* is a game in itself. You're trying to talk everyone from thugs to world leaders into revealing a conspiracy, and

Net hack The complexities of the new hacking minigame

1. Entry point

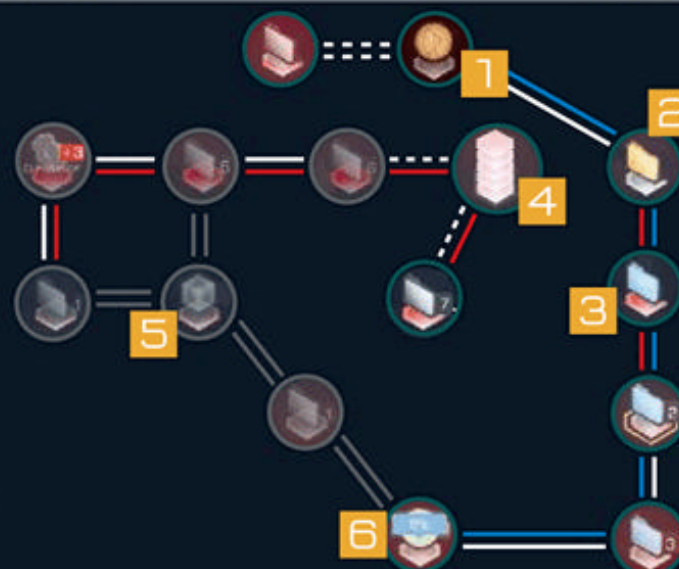
This is where you start—there's no time limit at first.

2. Captured node

You can capture any adjacent node, but there's a chance you'll be detected.

3. Tracer attack

Once you're detected, a trace works its way towards your entry point: that's your time limit.



4. Tracer program

The enemy trace spreads out from here. Each node it captures first will be slower for you to take.

5. Bonus node

You don't need to capture these, but they sometimes give you XP, money, or hacking tools.

6. Objective

This is the node you're trying to capture before the time runs out.

there's a knack to that conversational combat. It's not about light side or dark side: you have to pay careful attention to exactly what you'll say, and whether your argument really makes sense, because it's absolutely possible to lose, permanently depriving you of useful information. The high stakes make these conversations feel like the real boss fights. When you face the final villain, your options aren't which glowing weak spot to shoot—they're "Appeal," "Critique," and "Extrapolate."

The full story is a vast and complex thing, crammed into every apartment you break into, every secret room you find, every rooftop you clamber on. There's a piece of information to be found in the first room of the game that isn't explicitly revealed to you until the end, 27 hours later. It's a story-junkie's blissful overdose.

It's also a story and world that reacts to you. There are a few times when critical characters can't be killed, but I was more often surprised when they could. Conversely, the seemingly inevitable death of at least one character can be averted, and some decisions made in the middle of the game don't play out until the end.

The places your missions take you are gorgeous. You start in Detroit, a dim vision of an industrial city collapsed and revived one too many times. Arriving in Heng Sha after that, a Chinese metropolis overshadowed by a second ground level where the rich live, is genuinely like visiting a new country—large, bewildering, and excitingly foreign. The game

could do with one more city hub to flesh out its vision of the future—we glimpse the dazzling utopia of upper Heng Sha through windows, and the dense skyline of Montreal from a helipad, but never quite get immersed in either.

Freedom isn't free

Is it as good as *Deus Ex*? Not quite—that slight shift away from improvisation and wide-open spaces stops it just short. But it's absolutely the *Deus Ex* of our age, a genuinely worthy prequel, and a game that puts almost everything in the genre to shame.

It's a game built with respect for the player. At every stage, Eidos Montreal has asked "What if the player wants to do this?" Instead of answering with, "Put an invisible wall there," they've kept working on it until you *can*, and you're rewarded for original thinking.

I don't know about you, but I've been waiting a long time for a game like that. I've been humping low walls, shooting NPCs, and trying to smash down locked doors for 11 years, and every other game has broken, buckled, or refused to react.

I hope we won't let it be the last time we see a game like this for another decade. I'd love to see *Human Revolution* show that smart can sell, and that gamers love freedom more than they love firing assault rifles at the Middle East. ■

VERDICT

A dark, cool, and beautiful revival of an incredible game. Smart, substantial, funny, creative, and endlessly entertaining.

PC GAMER
94

Decisions about how to upgrade yourself are agonizing. It's like picking a superpower.

ODD COUPLE

Rewarding co-op combat saves **FEAR 3** from a frightfully bad campaign *by Rob Zacny*

Need to know

What is it?

A horror-themed co-op first-person shooter

Influenced by

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, *Left 4 Dead*

Play it on

Dual-core 3GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce GTX 280/Radeon HD 4870

Alternatively

FEAR (92%)

Copy protection

Steam

Wandering through darkened hallways with a buddy, with constant achievement pop-ups high-fiving your eyeballs every time you pick up a dozen ammo packs, it's hard to get into the mood for horror. It's a problem that *FEAR 3* can't resolve in its attempt to integrate co-op, and sacrificing the spooky mood reduces it to just another shooter with great action but a lot of typical problems.

As it awkwardly wedges itself into *FEAR*'s mythology, the plot approaches incoherence: psychic soldier Point Man once again battles the evil Armacham, a defense contractor so powerful that it can apparently conduct open warfare inside the United States; while trying to prevent his ghost-mother Alma from giving ghost-birth to the ghost-child she conceived with that *other* psychic commando from *FEAR 2*.

Pointy and the Ghost

When weak storytelling and tedious level design get out of the way, *FEAR 3* shows flashes of greatness.

Point Man might be a typical FPS hero with recharging health, two weapon slots, bullet-time, and a magnetic attraction to cover; but his dead psycho brother and new co-op partner Paxton Fettel can zap, stun, and even possess enemies. This power makes for deliciously chaotic battles, as both players are pushed to charge forward into close-quarters combat to feed Fettel's need for harvesting fresh kills. The best sections are spectacular whirlwinds of bullets, grenades, knives, slide-tackles, and slow-mo headshots.

Weapons don't have a lot of personality in general, though. There's little in the way of recoil or beefy sound effects—even the mighty, spike-launching Penetrator is watered down and unsatisfying. But they do fill important tactical roles: aggressive enemy AI and varied combat terrain gave me ample reason to adopt different approaches, even though the encounters and boss fights mostly felt the same.

Gunplay itself is rewarding, but the campaign will frustrate both solo and co-op players. Playing the early missions with a friend, the horror

theme didn't work—rambling cut-scenes and scripted scares killed the pacing. Soloing the final act was an excruciating trial-and-error slog through unbalanced encounters. Scares, such as they are, come in the form of cliché blood-spattered walls, corpse-piles, distorted visions, and annoying monsters that're more pest than terror. There is no imagination or style here, just repeated blood-textures and shrill screams.

No safety in numbers

Multiplayer is more effective at conveying menace, chaos, and violence, and each mode cleverly twists convention. During one "Contractions" co-op survival game I was backpedaling from a pair of ax-wielding cultists and stumbled into Alma, who wanders the map at random. She instantly teleported me outside, and I had to run-and-gun my way back to my squad as cultists hunted me in the eerie mists. It's fun in spite of the console-esque sabotage: local hosting makes for iffy connections (not that you know your ping, because *FEAR 3* doesn't tell you), and a lack of text chat in the lobby makes communication difficult when Steam's voice chat gets choppy.

When it works—such as when the brothers eviscerate a roomful of enemies in mere seconds, or in a close-run multiplayer match—*FEAR 3* is an enjoyable, even refreshing FPS. Its strong combat and clever mechanics save it from its own clumsy campaign, and it's worth playing for those moments, no matter how hard it tries to convince you otherwise. ■

Gunplay itself is rewarding, but the campaign will frustrate both solo and co-op players.

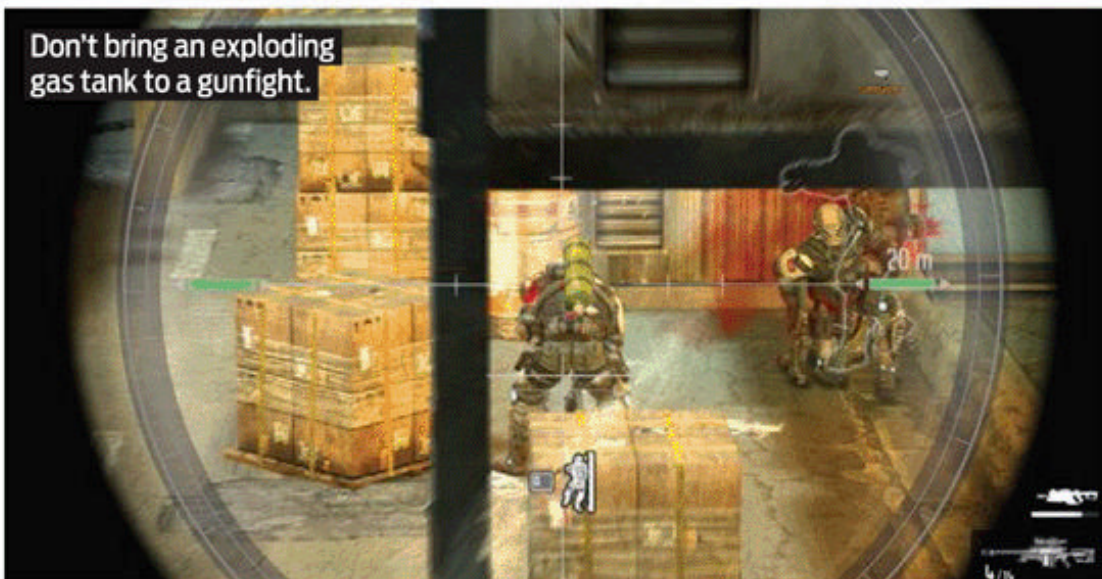


◆ Price \$50 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher Warner Bros. Interactive ◆ Developer Day 1 Studios
◆ Multiplayer 2- or 4-player co-op ◆ Link www.whatisfear.com ◆ ESRB M

VERDICT

FEAR 3 spends too much time being a mediocre horror game and not enough innovating, but it's still a wild shooter.

PC GAMER
74





This would be a good puzzle, except for the mandatory failure animation every time you try a solution.

RIDDLED

Expect to find a few pieces missing in **PUZZLE AGENT 2** by Richard Cobbett

Need to know

What is it?

Light-hearted puzzles and mysteries based on Graham Annable's *Grickle* cartoons (www.youtube.com/grickle)

Influenced by

Puzzle Agent, *Fargo*

Play it on

2.4GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, integrated graphics

Alternatively

Puzzle Agent (74%)

Copy protection

Steam/Online activation

Before you can start reading, take this quick test: Question 1: what is the next number in this sequence: 1, 2, 3, 4...? If you answered "5," keep reading. If you answered "5" in an incredulous, even insulted voice, I'm sorry, but you're overqualified for *Puzzle Agent 2*.

The original *Puzzle Agent* is made up of a basic, mostly uninspired set of puzzles linked by a quirky Professor-Layton-Visits-Twin-Peaks plot. It wasn't amazing, but it was fine for what it was—Telltale dipping a toe into the water and seeing if anyone bit. We're in sequel territory now though, and things haven't improved one iota.

Not only does *Puzzle Agent 2* fall back almost immediately onto generic sequence breaking, Sokoban puzzles, and similar Christmas cracker stuff—up to and including the tedious old get-the-animals-across-the-stream-without-them-eating-each-other yawner—most are so easy that the part that slows

you down is not believing that the solution really *is* that simple.

Equally annoying is that as before, the story linking them all together is little more than an excuse to be a bit weird and kooky. Zero effort is spent on getting you up to speed if you didn't play the first game; and even if you did, *Puzzle Agent 2* is a nonsensical, Coen Brothers-style mess of forest gnomes, astronauts, and government conspiracies that gets a few smiles every now and then—especially when poking fun at its own silliness—but which never even comes close to being a coherent mystery.

Take the hint

A few challenges do add a spark to things, but they're the rare exceptions in a game that honestly feels like someone went on Amazon, bought a copy of "101 Fun Puzzles For Kidz," and squiggled a few cartoon characters on top.

If you do get stuck, you're never more than a click away from a hint

(or less, if you have a pet cat around to point out what you missed). The most common reason you'll find yourself giving in, though, is when the instructions just aren't clear. As with the first game, the rules for each puzzle are on a separate screen from the puzzle itself, and they're not always phrased well. In addition, there are several where you'll want to experiment with solutions and mechanics a little, but you have to sit through a long, unskippable "YOU HAVE FAILED" sequence every damn time.

Rough edges could be easily forgiven if *Puzzle Agent 2* was as good at offering puzzles as it expects you to be at solving them. Instead, you may as well just go buy "101 Fun Puzzles For Kidz" yourself, and idly solve a few while rewatching *Fargo* on DVD. ■

VERDICT

It's a poor follow-up: the biggest puzzle is how, with the *Layton* games to steal ideas from, it gets the basics so wrong.

PC GAMER
43

◆ Price \$10 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher Telltale Games ◆ Developer Telltale Games
◆ Multiplayer No ◆ Link www.telltalegames.com ◆ ESRB NR



It's like *Where's Waldo?* but with alien plasma bullets.

BULLET HEAVEN

JAMESTOWN: LEGEND OF THE LOST COLONY will take you back *by Lucas Sullivan*

The story of *Jamestown* certainly gets your attention—the backdrop for this outstanding tribute to old-school vertical-scrolling shooters reads like an insane revisionist edit of the Wikipedia page for the European settlement of North America. In this version, Jamestown is founded in 1607—on Mars—and the evil Conquistador is leading an army of invading aliens to destroy it. After completing this nostalgic arcade flight through a blizzard of neon bullets, I'm willing to go with that version.

Jamestown matches the Japanese greats in gameplay, with superbly polished balance that rewards skill and a deeply nuanced scoring system. In the tradition of classics like *Mars Matrix* and *Guwange*, you'll pilot one of four unique ships (each with two distinct firing patterns) through alien-infested skies, and finely tuned controls enable weaving ever-so-carefully through pink and blue bullets using a mouse, keyboard, or gamepad.

For those who can appreciate its low-res retro sensibilities, calling the graphics gorgeous would be an understatement: sprites are meticulously detailed and vibrantly animated, bolstered with invigorating music fueled by snare drums and violins. Characters

maintain a charming deadpan façade as they instruct you to defend the “New World” as Walter Raleigh himself, alongside other historical figures like John Smith and Virginia Dare. The gleeful absurdity of the boss battle with the Conquistador is something to behold.

Power hour

Survival in *Jamestown* is as hard as you make it. Normal is suitable for a casual run, but crank it up to Divine difficulty, or play the Gauntlet mode (the entire game with no continues), and you'll get your butt handed to you on a bullet-riddled platter in no time flat. You can play through the campaign in around an hour—par for the course, as shmups (shoot 'em ups) are designed to be played again and again until fully mastered. Co-op is an absolute blast, as the insanity of later bosses is best shared with friends, but multiplayer is criminally restricted to local, same-screen play only.

Jamestown harkens back to an era when we played games just to get a high score—when beating a game this challenging actually earned you bragging rights. Were *Jamestown* an arcade machine, I'd plunk \$10 worth of quarters into it in a heartbeat. To play it as much as I want for that price is a steal. ■

PC GAMER
90

◆ Price \$10 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher Final Form Games ◆ Developer Final Form Games
◆ Multiplayer 4-player co-op (local only) ◆ Link www.finalformgames.com/jamestown ◆ ESRB NR



Fist bumps translate in all languages.

CREAVURES is all glow and no go

The incandescent forest of *CreaVures* may never dim, but my resolve to continue playing sure did. Stiff controls and monotonous gameplay encumber this beautiful 2D platformer, and gathering glowing orbs of light lost its luster when I realized there was no punishment for ignoring them. Swapping between characters to navigate levels using their unique abilities lacks any thought, since every obstacle's trick is spoiled by obvious context clues in the environment. It feels like a four-hour tutorial to a game that might have used its mechanics better, never trusting its players enough to present them with a thoughtful challenge. ■ *Jonathan Cooper*

PC GAMER
45

◆ Price \$10 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Link <http://bit.ly/creav> ◆ ESRB NR



That's the saddest anyone has ever looked while holding a hoverboard.

BACK TO THE FUTURE EPISODE 5 almost hits 88mph

OUTATIME corrects many of the past four episodes' weaknesses with plentiful locations, a strong script, and a fulfilling conclusion to what has been an upsettingly lackluster series. While still plagued with distracting bugs and occasionally unclear puzzles, the more action-oriented plot has fun with “what if?” scenarios of time travel, and in general feels closer to the spirit of the *Back to the Future* movies. Voice acting continues to be a high point, and this episode features a real treat in the form of an appearance by the real Michael J. Fox. ■ *Jonathan Cooper*

PC GAMER
75

◆ Price \$25 for full season ◆ Release Out now Link bit.ly/bttf5 ◆ ESRB T

BLAST OFF

STEEL STORM: BURNING RETRIBUTION

breezes through bullet hell **by James Murff**

Flying at top speed through a sci-fi cityscape, I pause to rack up a quadruple kill off of a few weak enemies. As I effortlessly cut a swath through the hostile turrets and hovercrafts, I wonder if anything in *Steel Storm: Burning Retribution* will give me a hard time. Blowing these guys away makes you feel like an unstoppable force, but the challenge is rarely entertaining.

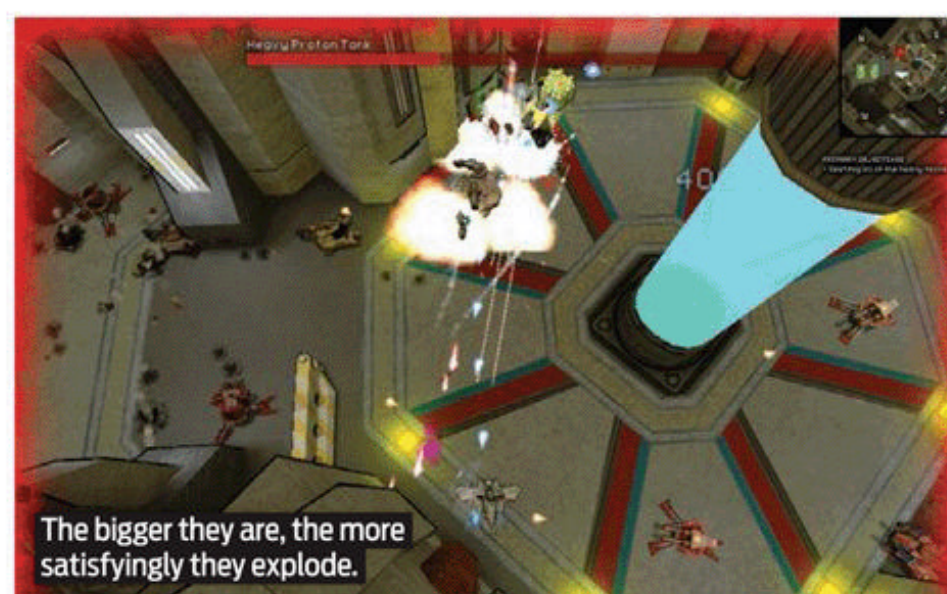
SS:BR should feel familiar, as it's essentially the same straightforward design idea behind shooters such as *Doom*, but applied to a top-down shooter where you're piloting a hovercraft. You explore small, enemy-packed levels trying to find the exit in time, blasting apart anything that gets in your way. It's an excellent stress reliever, as each level is short and the enemies die fast and hard with satisfying explosions.

Many of the weapons you acquire are uninspired, typical fare, but others—such as the mortar—wreak enormous amounts of gratuitous destruction. As you progress, enemies get tougher and maps get bigger and more intricate, but your general experience in the first level is what you can expect from the rest of the game; *SS:BR* makes no attempt to introduce anything new.

Sound is simplistic and repetitive, and while the overall visual design is clean and appealing, enemy art is bland and undetailed. Most enemies use attack patterns, relying on charging, and copious amounts of fire, rather than smart use of cover.

Simple, explosion-packed action is what *SS:BR* looks like, and that's exactly what it'll deliver. Nothing more, nothing less. ■

PC GAMER
65



◆ Price \$10 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher Kot in Action ◆ Developer Kot in Action ◆ Multiplayer 16 players ◆ Link www.steel-storm.com ◆ ESRB NR

QUICK DRAW

SIX GUN SAGA is more fun than a good hanging **by Rob Zacny**

Six Gun Saga is a casual card game made for serious gamers. It may be perfect for killing time, but it doesn't waste it.

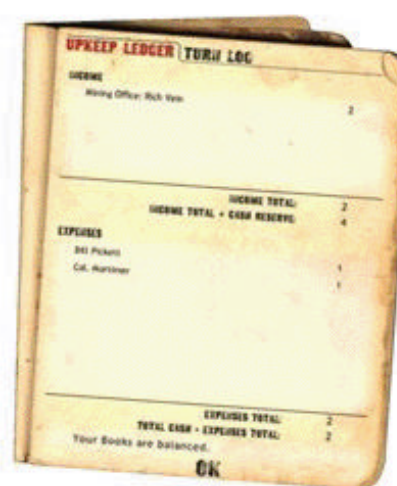
SGS converts classic Western tropes and characters into beautifully illustrated virtual playing cards, and deals you a hand. Every card offers interesting choices: I might want to recruit the gunman English Bob into a "posse" stack for added firepower, or I could cash him in and use the money for something else—at the risk of an AI player recruiting him. Alternatively, I could just use his Suspicious Fire ability to burn down an opponent's general store. Every single card imposes these kinds of straightforward, difficult trade-offs, and together they help each game tell a Western story.

Players put character cards into posses that can perform missions for

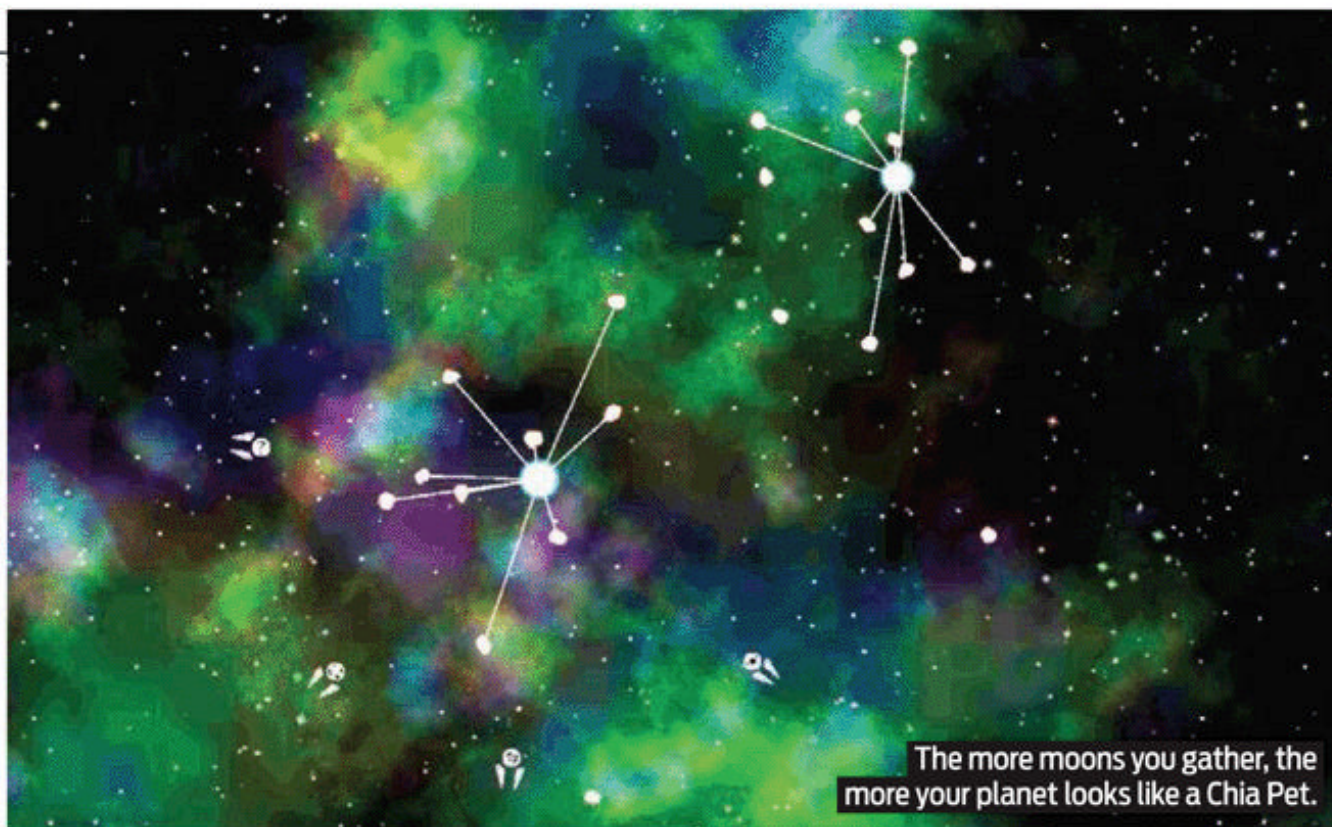
victory points, or attack another posse that's on a mission. This allows for several strategies, and some unpredictable games. Once, I was losing badly, but then Wyatt Earp and his elite posse went on a killing spree, gunning down eight of my opponents' men. When I tried the same thing the next game, however, I got smoked by an AI that'd farmed missions with several small, weak groups of characters.

That variety comes at the cost of balance, however—I saw a lot of runaway victories. The lack of any multiplayer is badly missed, but at least the AI plays a competent game; that challenge is interesting enough to keep me coming back when I have a few minutes to pass with a tasty bite of strategy. ■

PC GAMER
73



◆ Price \$15 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher Cryptic Comet ◆ Developer Cryptic Comet ◆ Multiplayer No ◆ Link <http://bit.ly/sixgs> ◆ ESRB NR



EMPTY SPACE

SOLAR 2's bright concept fizzles out in the cold expanse *by Tyler Wilde*

If you're drifting through space right now, you're probably *dead*—unless, of course, you're a sentient asteroid. Asteroids don't die. Or do much at all, really. I haven't met any space rocks personally, but as far as I can tell, they mostly just drift around and run into stuff, so while playing as a celestial body in a sandbox universe sounds unique, it's mostly just—yup—drifting around and running into stuff.

The primary goal of *Solar 2* is to grow your starting insignificant hunk of space debris into a planet, then a star, and eventually a bustling multi-star system. Early asteroid life is easy: just smash into other asteroids to fuse and grow. But once your space ball achieves planet status (suck it, Pluto), those same collisions chip away at its mass, so to continue your expansion you must carefully (and tediously) pull asteroids into orbit and then absorb them. It feels like trying to steer a tanker through fleets of speed boats.

When your planet grows big enough, life blooms, defenses are built, and a swarm of *Asteroids*-style triangle ships launches to protect the hive. The life-forms—which act independently of the player—exist primarily to combat aliens who inexplicably enjoy blowing up innocent planets. Weird buggers.

Grow even bigger and *boom*, you're a star, kid. Stars can pull planets into orbit and steer them into asteroid fields to graze, or absorb them to grow. Keep

your planets well-fed, and they too can develop life and eventually achieve stardom, resulting in massive multi-star systems. I peaked at six stars—not because there's a limit, but because I got bored and decided to careen through the universe in a careless fit of destruction, which was momentarily cathartic.

A void to avoid

Wandering and growing does have its charm, and the synth-y music can induce pleasant space-hypnosis, but with nothing else, it'd be hard to classify *Solar 2* as a "game." That's why a sarcastic, jocular deity offers you mechanically simple but viciously difficult missions—fortunately optional. Killing aliens with a sufficiently giant system is doable (and dull), but finesse operations (such as protecting small planets from asteroid bombardments), are bafflingly cruel, and the rewards aren't worth the hardship—completing missions does nothing but slowly unlock control of game variables, like gravity and ship speed.

Solar 2 has a universe of potential; with more to do and see and a greater sense of purpose a future *Solar* iteration could be great. As it exists now, however, *Solar 2* is a simple space physics simulation with just a hint of a game, and building disposable arrangements of revolving circles quickly loses its novelty. ■



◆ Price \$10 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher Murudai ◆ Developer Murudai ◆ Multiplayer no
◆ Link www.murudai.com/solar ◆ ESRB N/A

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PRIZE FIGHTER

PC GAMER
EDITOR'S
CHOICE
★★★★★

SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV: ARCADE EDITION

is a pugilist's paradise *by Lucas Sullivan*

Need to know

What is it?

A one-on-one arcade-style fighter

Influenced by

Street Fighter II, *BlazBlue*

Play it on

2.4GHz dual-core CPU, 3GB RAM, GeForce 8800/Radeon HD 4870

Alternatively

Street Fighter IV (93%)

Copy protection

Games for Windows Live

What separates the great fighting games from the shallow, button-mashing brawls? It's the underlying strategy—the intricate dance of anticipating your opponent's next move and choosing your own fireball or uppercut to counter it. That's where *Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition* is in a class of its own—it's built upon the excellent foundation of 2009's *Street Fighter IV*, but fine-tuned into its own unique stand-alone experience. While there are few other fighting games on the PC, there's nothing on consoles to rival this game's balance and wildly diverse cast either.

Though *SSF4AE* shares much of its gameplay with *SF4*, this version's worlds ahead in terms of depth and strategy. Besides the bevy of new characters—14 freshmen fighters increase the total roster to 39—everyone's been rebalanced: Sagat's no longer an unfair powerhouse, pushovers like Guile got some much-needed love, and the option to choose between two flashy Ultra

comeback moves for each character lets you adapt to an opponent's strengths without benching your favorite fighter.

Newcomers Evil Ryu and Oni definitely steal the show—their complex move sets and ridiculously powerful Ultras make them as scary as they look, while their diminutive health keeps them in check. The varied cast guarantees that you'll find someone who perfectly suits your playstyle, and there's enough new content here to justify a purchase even if you already own *SF4*.

Enter the Dragon Punch

AE features the same crisp art style as *SF4*, blending vibrant colors with a brushstroke aesthetic. In the audio department, fireballs and uppercuts have a satisfyingly heavy crack to them, and the music got me suitably amped-up during bouts. To the delight of purist nutjobs like myself, the options include the ability to switch between English and Japanese voiceovers at will.

As with almost any fighting game,

the acceptable AI can only keep you entertained for so long; the most satisfying brawls are always between human opponents. If you don't have a second gamepad or Games for Windows Live friends to spar with, *AE*'s robust matchmaking gets you into an online game in a jiff, and supports tournaments and team-battles as well. Besides fighting, you can spectate pro-level players using the improved replay system, or hone your most damaging combos in helpful training modes. There are some hiccups, though—playing against someone with a slower internet connection resulted in the most frustrating, lag-tastic match of my life.

Arcades in the US may be dead and buried, but *Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition* keeps them alive in spirit with endlessly enthralling Shoryuken-packed scraps. ■

VERDICT

An artfully balanced essential upgrade for *Street Fighter IV* owners, and an amazing value for newcomers.

PC GAMER
92

◆ Price \$40 ◆ Release Out now ◆ Publisher Capcom ◆ Developer Capcom
◆ Multiplayer 2 players ◆ Link www.streetfighter.com ◆ ESRB T



STACKED DECK

Monstrously powerful cards await in **MTG: DUELS OF THE PLANESWALKERS 2012** by Chris Comiskey

My name is Gideon," mutters the Planeswalker in the opening cinematic, "and I'm about to die." And that's exactly what you're going to do—a lot. *Magic: The Gathering—Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012* is a murderously difficult but addicting adaptation of the tabletop card game.

If you're new to *Magic*, this game does a terrific job of helping you learn the rules of this old-fashioned card game. Awesomely, the virtual cards look exactly like their physical counterparts, and all the richness and welcome familiarity to the real-life game is left intact (with only minor creative liberties involving conservatively-used effects, such as claw swipes over your avatar when you're attacked, or spell sparkles on the cards).

The difficulty of this version comes from starting you off with only two measly decks. You're *supposed* to be able to buy more potent cards and decks, but at the time of this review (two weeks after launch) there's nothing available to buy. It's maddening, since AI opponents already have all the cards unlocked, and they'll pulverize you with

them. The only way to acquire new cards is to deal with the abuse until you win an unlikely victory against the AI. Fortunately, playing against (or with) friends in the new four-player multiplayer modes—Arch Enemy and 2-Headed Giant—is far more fun than the pain you'll take in single-player.

Areas like UI have improved, but *Planeswalkers 2012* still doesn't let you construct your own decks, you only swap out certain cards. Also, casting Instants (often used as nasty surprises to counter an adversary's moves) is rage-inducing. In the tabletop game, you can use them any time; here, you can only throw 'em down before or after combat, and there are only a few seconds to activate them. Having to show your hand too early—or worse, not at all—is frustrating. Attempting to regenerate my creatures at critical moments often wouldn't work either, and I'd lose unjustly.

For a paltry 10 bucks though, there's plenty here to enjoy, and the new cards and decks make it a worthy upgrade for those who own last year's *Duels of the Planeswalkers*. ■

PC GAMER
70

PC GAMER

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalizing the review. We review each game on its own merits and match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The primary aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable

A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak

Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre

A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice, even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair

A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good

Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice

A glowing example within its genre of excellence in design and execution.



A game scoring 80% or more is eligible to receive the PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

PC Gamer's 10 Latest and Greatest

Frozen Synapse (87%)
September 2011

Portal 2 (94%)
June 2011

DCS: A-10C Warthog (92%)
June 2011

Crysis 2 (89%)
May 2011

Shogun 2: Total War (92%)
May 2011

Gary Grigsby's War in the East (90%)
May 2011

Test Drive Unlimited 2 (90%)
April 2011

DC Universe Online (88%)
April 2011

Dragon Age 2 (94%)
April 2011

WoW: Cataclysm (93%)
March 2011

EXTRA LIFE

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CLASSICS OF PC GAMING REVISITED

Fallout 2

VICE. VICE NEVER CHANGES.
NOT EVEN AFTER THE
NUCLEAR APOCALYPSE

by Richard Cobbett

All you have to lose
is your soul. Fair
trade, right?



Let me tell you the story of a town called New Reno. Isolated and protected from the worst of the Great War by its mountains, it rose from the wasteland like a phoenix addicted to a deadly drug. Folks called it the capital of sin and whores, safe for tourists only while their pockets jangled with precious bottle caps. At least, that's how it was before you arrived.

While I enjoyed *Fallout: New Vegas*, the actual town of New Vegas—to be more exact, the Strip—was a bitter disappointment. You spend a good third of the game waiting to get into this fabled gambling utopia, only for the gates to finally open and reveal four deserted casinos squatting amongst

post-apocalyptic debris. No texture, no threat, no soul. Not so in New Reno.

Threesome

The New Reno of *Fallout 2* is one of the most hideous, squalid hives you'll ever visit, but in the best possible way. Its corruption feels appropriate, and in true *Fallout* style, it's something you can exploit as easily as you can resist. You can join any of the four crime families, quickly work your way up through the ranks, and become a Made Man: at the expense of being shot at if you wander into other families' turf. And those are just some of your options. What matters is that if you can make it in New Reno, you can make it anywhere in the Wasteland, and all you have to lose is

your soul. Fair trade, right?

Fallout 2 remains a divisive RPG, even among the series' notoriously rabid fans. It's much sillier than its predecessor, with references to everything from *Monty Python* to *Star Trek* largely dropped at random. Its handling of things like sex is either more mature or more "mature," depending on your sense of humor. If you're a female character for instance, your first encounter with one potential party member—a kid named Myron—involves him trying to slip you a mickey. And then, most likely, you kicking his scabby balls up through his mouth.

The part most people remember though (if only because there can't be a single player who didn't try it) is the sleazy porn studio in bad old New Reno—the place where you can temporarily put aside your quest and (cough) make your star rise. You don't get to see any low-resolution hanky-panky, but you do get a special Reputation bonus, as well as a porn name that will haunt you for the rest of your quest. Dick Mountenjoy? Rodd Rokks? How about Ebineezer Screws or Arnold Swollenmember? All are actual choices that people in the street will start shouting at you—as are Lucy Loose, Pokeahotass, and Dominatrish for less-than-ladylike ladies.

It's actually a relatively small area, but that doesn't matter. Not only is there a lot to do and see, it's an incredibly reactive little piece of design. As a female character for instance, expect to take lots of "sugar boobs" and



READ ME

RELEASE DATE
1998

PUBLISHER
Interplay

DEVELOPER
Black Isle Games

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Old Games

VIDEO GUIDE
<http://bit.ly/c83zTj>

TRIVIA

You never have to set foot in New Reno to finish *Fallout 2*. In fact, with a bit of luck you can run down to the final location and save the world in under 15 minutes without using any cheats—just your own knowledge of the game. If you do explore though, there are plenty of other good towns to find, including the fascist Vault City, the equally bustling San Francisco, and the home of the New California Republic, a key political player in the later games made by Bethesda.

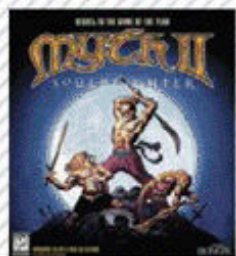


BEST REJECTED ART
The Child-Killer Perk

SCARIEST ARMOR
The Enclave (see opposite page)

YOUR PC IN 1998
Pentium 90, 16MB
RAM, Windows 95,
15" Monitor

OTHER 1998 GAMES WE ♥



MYTH II: SOULBLIGHTER

Logan: *Myth II* drew me in by slicing away the RTS mechanics that frustrated me, then made me watch in horror as my brave little dwarves were reduced to pulpy stains across the moors.



JAZZ JACKRABBIT 2

Lucas: Playing the shareware version of this game entertained me for hours on end as a youth. Jazz was OK, but Spaz, his red rabbit needs-to-switch-to-decaf brother, he was my JAM!



HALF-LIFE

Tyler: Valve's debut title crowbarred into my heart with its unparalleled scripting and level design. Shortly after, a couple mods called *Counter-Strike* and *Day of Defeat* came along and changed my definition of "free time" forever.

"hey baby" crap. Do a porn movie and most guys love you, but the hookers sniff and spit—as opposed to salivating over a male stud. Become a Made Man as either gender, though, and the guards who previously gave you trouble suddenly can't wait to suck up. Little, dynamic details like these do more for making a world feel "real" than a thousand carefully coded AI routines.

What happens in Reno

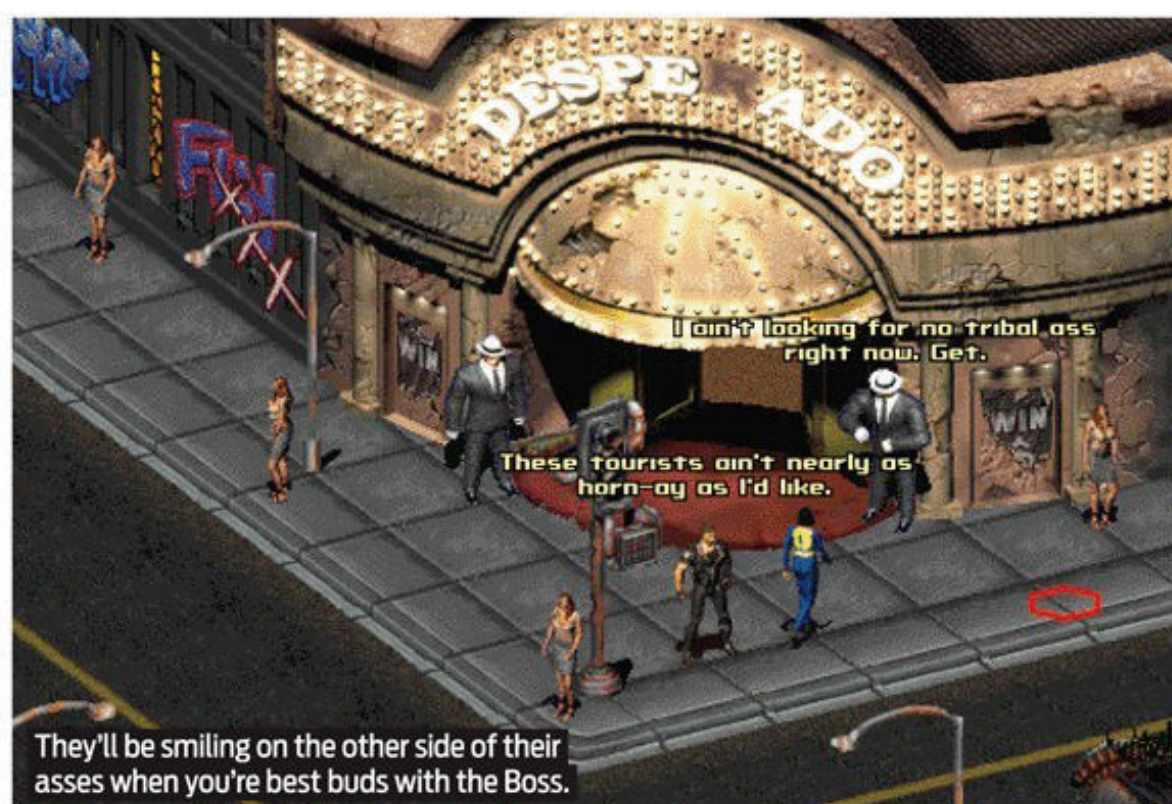
F2's real genius, though, is that there's no assumption that you have to win every fight or see every possibility. Sure, if you come to New Reno sporting

However low New Reno sinks, nobody there will ever forget you.

stolen power armor, you'll be a force to be reckoned with. More likely, however, you'll arrive as just another schlub, easily put down if you go around starting fights with the wrong people. Not being the ultimate badass changes everything. What little power and influence you accumulate in New Reno is *earned*, and it's more meaningful because of it. And that's

just the start.

You see, as a wanderer, you can never find home. You don't have to set foot in New Reno to finish *Fallout 2*, but if you do, you'll eventually have to leave. As with all the other towns you visit, however, your decisions have power. Who controls the streets? What happens to the drug trade? War may never change, but the world of *Fallout 2* definitely does, and the one thing you can guarantee as the final credits roll is that however low New Reno sinks into depravity, nobody there will ever forget you—the hero or villain they only knew as Arnold Swollenmember. ■



They'll be smiling on the other side of their asses when you're best buds with the Boss.



Oh, god, Myron. He's like if Scrappy-Doo and Jar-Jar Binks had a stillborn mutant baby. Who joined your party.



Bumping into a pack of radscorpions can only end well. For the hungry radscorpions.



Be careful what fights you pick. If possible, bring friends: not Myron.



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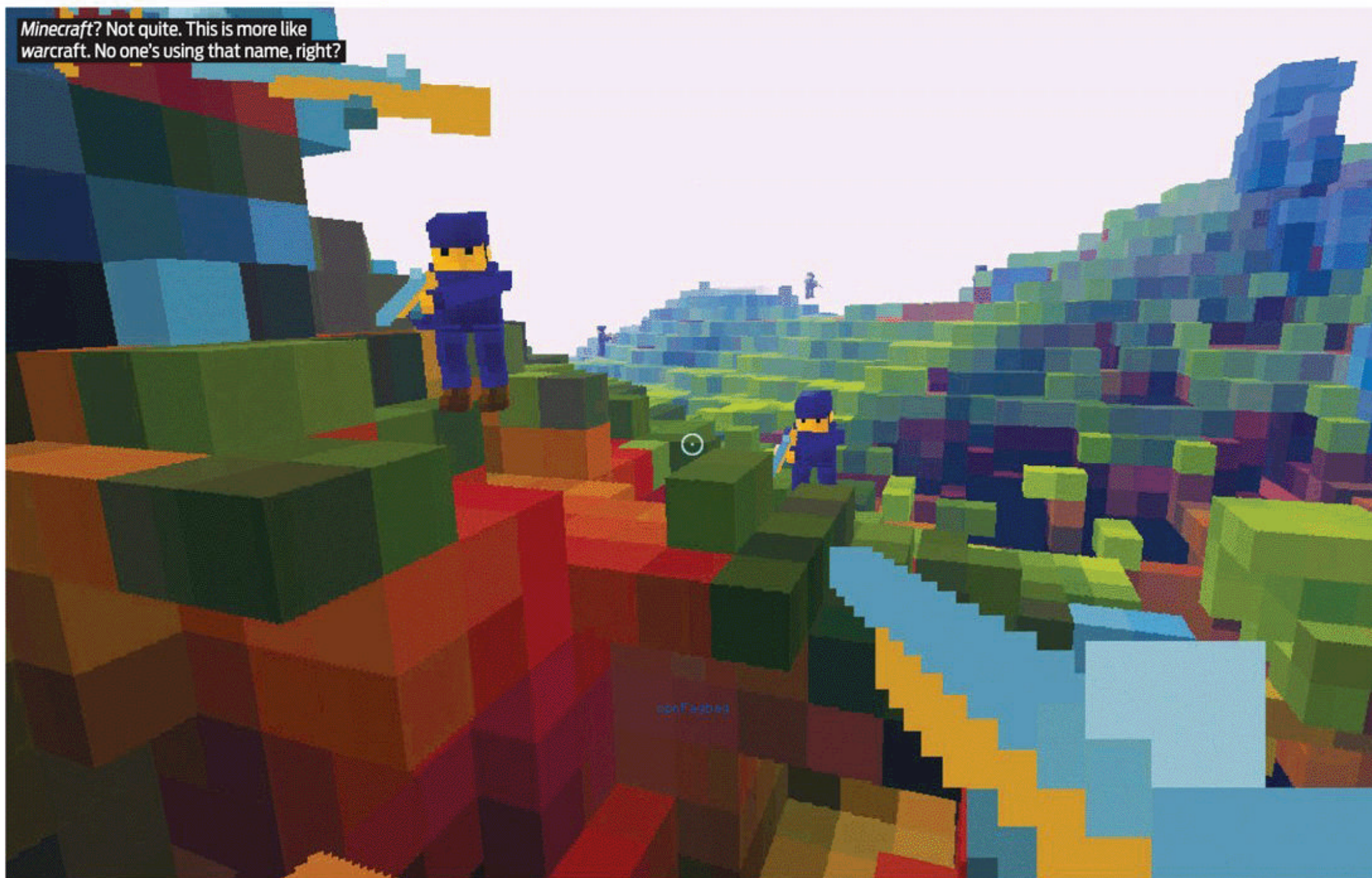
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Future
MEDIA WITH PASSION

Minecraft? Not quite. This is more like warcraft. No one's using that name, right?



1 Battle of the builders

FREEWARE WAGE KALEIDOSCOPIC CUBE WAR IN **ACE OF SPADES**

Picture *Minecraft* as a gritty war game and you're close to describing *Ace of Spades*. The randomly generated landscapes are replaced with a single 32-player map, and your crafting bench with a rifle and grenade. Your aim isn't just to survive; you must also travel into enemy territory to seize their intelligence. It's terrifying.

I'm venturing over the crest of a hill with two teammates. Their boxy heads swivel, scouring the area for the bright green uniforms of enemy snipers. The rifle is currently the only working weapon, but it's perfectly tuned. Headshots are lethal, and the iron sights offer just enough zoom to pick off enemies from the other side of a valley.

Farther down the hill, some teammates are building a defensive structure. The landscape can be edited by anyone: after an hour of play, the original map is unrecognizable. The rolling hills and valleys have been replaced by man-made bridges and towers.

We're descending to join in when a shot rings out, the soldier next to me flies backward, arms flailing. Everyone dives behind the nearest cover and returns fire. The low-fi visuals are forgotten: this feels more like war than any *Call of Duty*.

Our superior numbers drive the Green forces back. We cross the river to their former encampment and a corridor that seems to stretch on for miles. They've tunneled through the entire mountain; we emerge on the other side to find a series of small islands. The intelligence is somewhere beyond them, so our team gets to work building a network of bridges: it's on.

Ace of Spades is in an early stage of development. More weapons and objectives are planned, but it's already playable, and brilliant. Once the tiny client is downloaded servers can be accessed through links on the *Ace of Spades* site.

Give it a try—you won't regret it. **EL**

SIZE 3.7MB **LINK** www.ace-spades.com



EVAN SAYS...

"Build your opponent a golden bridge to retreat across." Only literally.

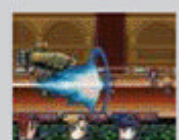
2

FREE

LEVEL UP

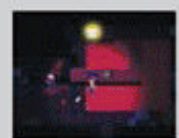
FOUR OF THE BEST GAMES MADE WITH RPG MAKER

» RPG Maker provides tools with which anyone can make a unique RPG adventure. Here's the pick of the games made by its community.



Alter A.I.L.A. Genesis

A.I.L.A.'s designer welded a complex battle system to a cyberpunk universe. Use chain attacks and manage your EX meter to beat bosses. <http://bit.ly/ak1NIM>



One Night: Full Circle

This adorable, top-down survival horror game has you dashing around in the dark, avoiding monsters and stocking up on supplies. <http://bit.ly/euE8Ak>



Starless Umbra

Three years in the making and still unfinished, this is a JRPG treat. Musical interludes and minigames spice up the plentiful combat. <http://bit.ly/etTsk6>



Professor McLogic Saves The Day

Solve dynamic logic puzzles around the world using your powers of deduction. <http://bit.ly/hxCrs6>

3 Hacks for Hawke

MODS THE BEST MODS AND TWEAKS FOR **DRAGON AGE 2**

Dragon Age 2 doesn't have the suite of mod tools that *Origins* did, but that hasn't kept the community from tinkering away at it.

If BioWare's official *Dragon Age 2* high-resolution texture pack is too much of a strain on your PC, spruce up Kirkwall with TrufflesDuval's unofficial texture pack (<http://bit.ly/forYLL>). If you're bothered by mages that can set fire to battlefields without singeing a single ally, check out the Nightmare difficulty mod (<http://bit.ly/fvdlwp>), it rebalances *DA2*'s highest difficulty level to include friendly fire.

Here are a few favorites, but you'll find more mods and tweaks at <http://bit.ly/5cTQXi>. **JA**



Alternative pets

In a city packed with more bandits than citizens, and more demons than bandits, your warhound isn't going to last long. It's a dragon-eat-dog world out there, which is why this mod replaces your little hound with a selection of alternatives, including a mighty ogre.

SIZE 29KB **LINK** <http://bit.ly/iOf3e>



Champion armor

In *Dragon Age 2*, Varric's embroidered retelling of your hero's origins kits you out in magnificent armor, and then cruelly discards it when the tale is told properly. This mod gives you that armor back, so you can look heroic from the very start of the game.

SIZE 29KB **LINK** <http://bit.ly/eolh5V>



Improved character creator

The existing character creator can only churn out lumpy potato faces, meaning that you're stuck with an uneditable default Hawke. Correct this blemish now with the Chargen Revamp, which gives you the power to fully customize Hawke's features.

SIZE 29KB **LINK** <http://bit.ly/fACAT3>

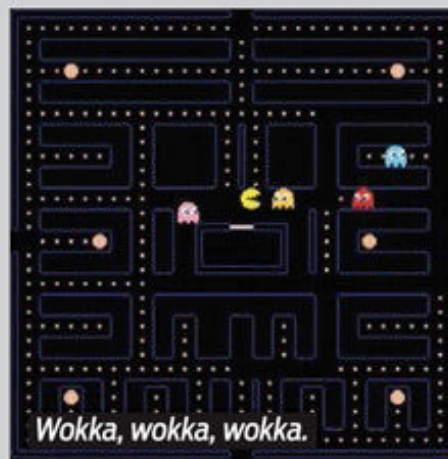
4

WEBGAME

EAT EVERYTHING

CONSUME OTHERS' CREATIONS IN *WORLD'S BIGGEST PAC-MAN*

Traditionally, you'd beat *Pac-Man* levels by gobbling up all the dots in a maze. Here, every maze has gaps that lead to other mazes, which in turn contain exits to even more mazes. *World's Biggest Pac-Man* lives up



to its name by chaining over 18,000 levels together in one vast grid.

Of course, one team of level designers couldn't have come up with that many new levels, no matter how many Skittles you've fed them. *WPM* gets around this by letting anyone with a Facebook account log in and build a new stage, and every new level is added to the ever-growing meta-grid.

At the time of this writing, over 422 million Pac-dots have been eaten, and more than 46 million ghosts have been killed: numbers to be proud of. Why not log on and help them grow even higher? **LS**

SIZE Browser-based **LINK** bit.ly/hMHUV5

5 A hole in the sky

MOD DODGE LASER DEATH GRIDS TO FIND **PORTAL: UNITY'S** CAKE

If you've completed *Portal 2* and have an insatiable urge to keep testing, look no further than *Portal: Unity*. It's a new campaign for the original game that cleverly recreates *Portal 2*'s new puzzle features, and adds a few more. Aerial Faith Plates send you flying through the air, Excursion Funnels carry you across test chambers, and Propulsion Gel has been remade as a treadmill platform that accelerates you to terminal velocity over the space of a few feet.

The new features include laser grids and portal-activated switches. The laser grids don't burn up turrets, but they'll fillet Chell if she

touches them. The test chambers are beautifully designed, and a sprinkling of new textures helps them feel even more sterile and menacing than those of the original game. There's even a new antagonist—a young boy whose voice guides you through each chamber. He's initially a more concerned and reasonable presence than GLaDOS, but as you'd expect, that changes.

In later stages, poisonous gas will force you to solve chambers quickly, and for even more challenge, try to find the hidden cake slices. **EL**

SIZE 250MB **LINK** <http://bit.ly/hV8Gmf>



Portals: the rich man's mirror since 2007.

Screencast your games online

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy
TIME Two hours

VITAL LINKS

See how it's done
bit.ly/ePgNgs

Game replays
bit.ly/BylbW

Streaming with style
bit.ly/fMOizb

A very funny man
bit.ly/9GNxsm

RICHARD COBBETT SHOWS THE WORLD HOW BAD HE IS AT GAMES

Playing games with someone looking over your shoulder can be the most annoying thing in the world. When it's a hundred chattering internet people though, it suddenly becomes one of the best.

Streaming your games is incredibly easy as long as you have a decent connection: the software and hosting you need to get started are free. (If you want to make money

off it, expect to pay through the nose for commercial accounts. But you can cross that bridge when your expanding ego comes to it.)

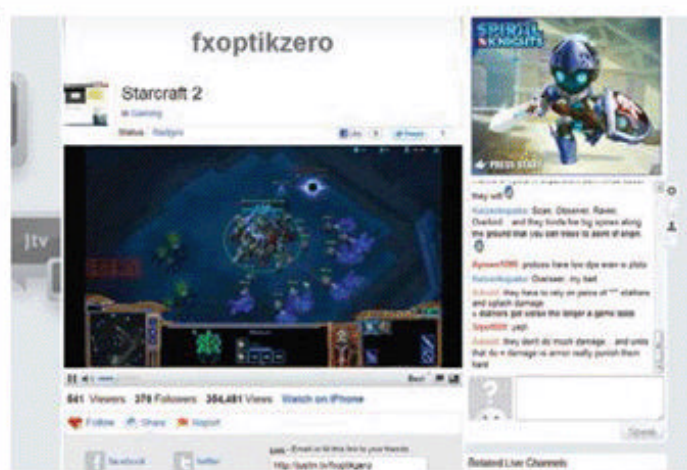
You might long for a thousand-strong audience hanging on your every click, but you don't have to be a celebrity or a comedian to make an interesting show. You may just want to show a friend exactly how to get past a tricky puzzle in *Portal 2*, or

demonstrate tactics to your *Team Fortress 2* clan, or document your tireless excavating in *Minecraft*.

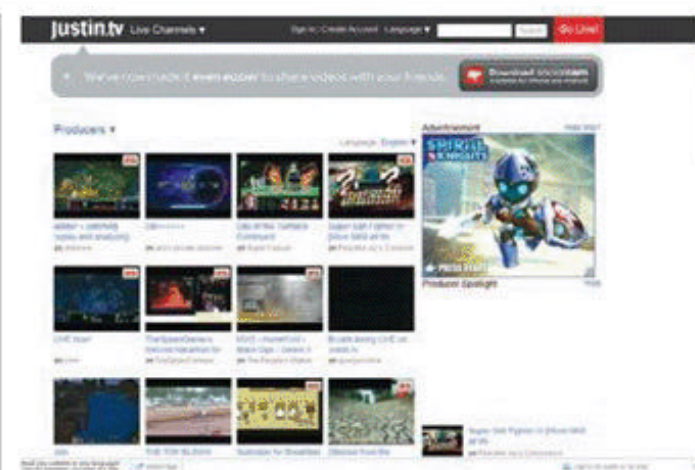
In either case, it's as easy as pressing a button to start recording, then you can share a link to your stream with the world. Streaming your games is one of the most exciting things to do with your connection that we bet you've never tried. Here's how to get started.



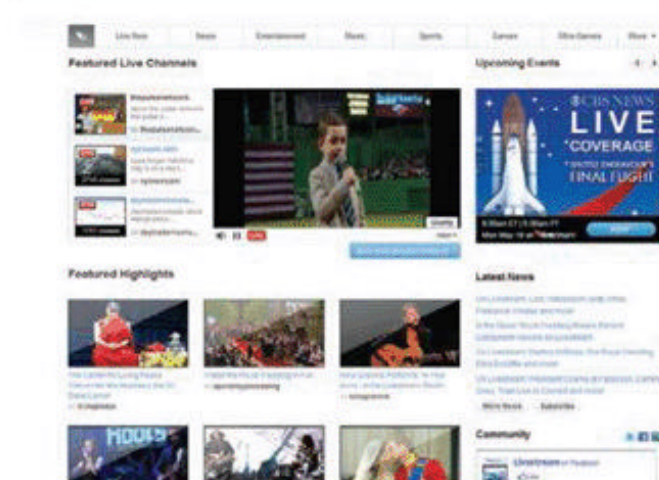
1 Check your connection
Most home broadband is sold based on its downstream, but for internet streaming it's far more important to know how effectively you can upload. Head to www.speedtest.net to get a rating on your upload speed. Over 700kbps is recommended, although not essential, depending on the kind of games you plan to stream. The slower-paced the game, the more forgiving both it and your viewers will be of inconsistent framerates and the occasional gap.



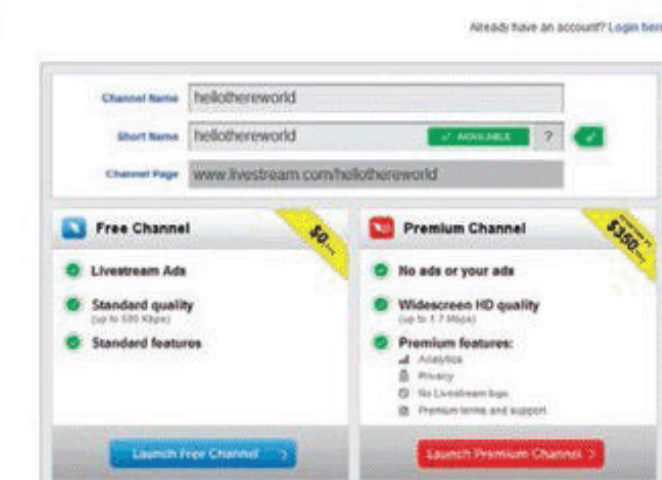
2 Pick a service
You won't be streaming from your PC directly—you simply don't have the bandwidth for more than a few viewers at once. Instead, you stream to a central service, which uses its incredibly fat pipe to send a copy of what's going on to as many people that show up. There are several services out there, but two of the most popular are Justin.tv and Livestream. Both are free to watch and start experimenting with, though they may put a ceiling on how many viewers you can have for free.



3 Meet Justin...
Justin.tv is the more indie of the two services, and while simply connecting a webcam and streaming your chattering face is easy enough, it's trickier to set up a direct stream from your games. On the downside, Justin.tv's advertising is a little obtrusive and it can include banner ads of the cheap "Naked Russian Girls Want To Talk To You" variety, which you might want to steer clear of depending on your audience.



4 ...and Livestream
Livestream is more corporate, but still has an excellent free offering. Livestream's main annoyances are long (60 second) ads that often run before people can connect to your stream, and that you can only stream SD quality video for free. On the plus side, it offers an easy-to-use application that hooks into DirectX games directly. That's why we're using Livestream here, but most of what follows is applicable to both services.



5 Signing up
Visit www.livestream.com to sign up, as well as create your channel's name and its "short" version, which will be your URL. After this, there's another form to fill in, including things like your channel's category, rating, and time zone. Fill out one last form, after which you can have more than 50 concurrent viewers. Ignore any Premium settings—they're \$350 a month. You'll only need to look into those if you plan to make money.



6 Casting made easy
Download and launch the official Procaster software and enter your login details. If you have a webcam or other supported video input source, it'll detect this (and you can switch to that from your screen via a shortcut). Notice the screen and controller icons: the first streams your desktop, the second handles DirectX games. If a game doesn't support DirectX, try Windowed mode and Desktop recording.



7 Sample streaming

To begin screencasting in either mode, press Ctrl+F1. It's that simple. Check your page while doing this, and after a few seconds, you'll be staring at your own desktop. Whoa. Drag the green overlay corners if you only want to show specific parts of the screen, and use your PC normally. Once you stop recording, a window pops up for you to name and archive the video so that viewers who missed the original stream can watch it later.



9 Narrate!

Get a microphone. To make the most of going live, you'll want to be able to talk over the gameplay you're casting to help contextualize what's going on in-game. Be sure to test your mic's levels thoroughly. A second monitor or laptop is also handy if you want to keep an eye on the chat channel, take questions, and otherwise interact with your eager viewers without constantly risking an Alt+Tab crash.



11 Spread the word

If you have a website, Twitter account, or you post on a forum, plan your stream in advance and tell people when it's happening—be sure to specify your time zone. The rest of the time, your stream will be silent, unless you create playlists of old videos or otherwise slot-in content from YouTube and other partners. It doesn't have to be your own stuff, but it helps.



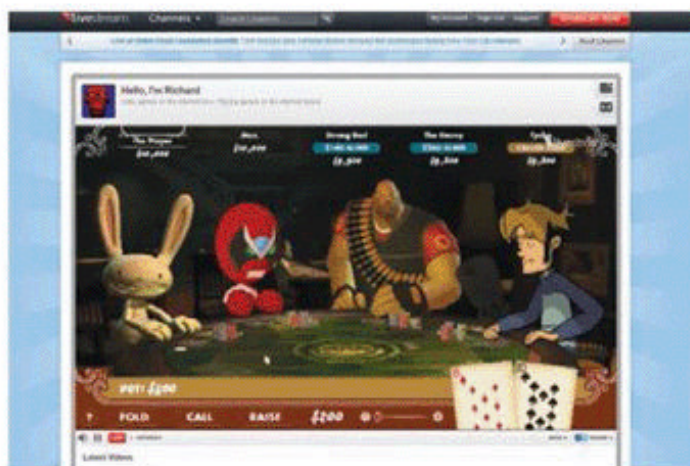
8 In-game studio

The game mode adds an overlay while you play. This won't be visible to your audience, but can be obtrusive in its default position. Press Ctrl+Alt+n to show or hide it. To stop recording, press Shift+Esc. You won't be interrupted by the video archiving pop-up while still in game, but it'll be waiting when you quit or Alt+Tab out. You can also Alt+Tab out to make sure the stream is working. It'll likely still show the game running in the background.



10 Radio dead air

After this, it's all about the performance. Standard radio rules apply: make sure to check your volume levels so that neither you nor the game are drowned out, don't talk over anything important, and try not to leave long, extended gaps. If a game doesn't lend itself well to this, consider instead uploading a finished, edited video to services like YouTube and Blip.tv. Streaming is fun, but it's not necessarily the ideal choice for every game.



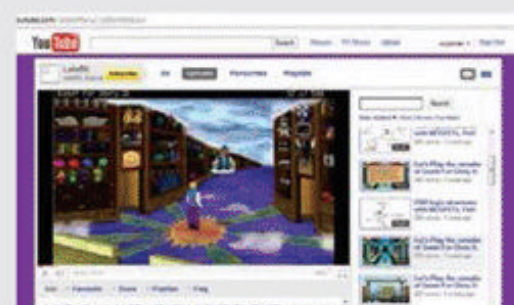
12 Live, from your house

All the other details are trimming: from picking background colors for your stream page to uploading logos and writing descriptions for search engines to pick up. If you already have a blog or website, both Livestream and Justin.tv can be embedded directly. As you produce more content, look for established livestreamers that you can team up with to earn more loyal viewers.

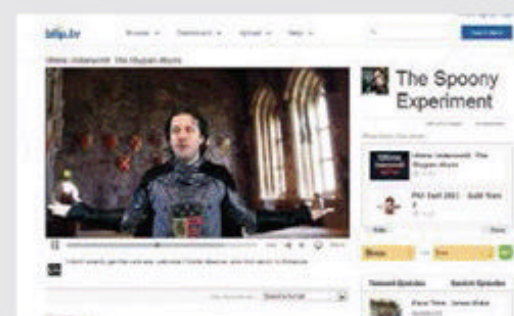
SKILLS

ONE WE MADE EARLIER

HOW TO SHARE PRERECORDED VIDEOS INSTEAD



1 If you don't have an audience already, YouTube is your best bet for gaining a foothold. The 15-minute video limits are a pain, but you're more likely to be found by people typing in relevant search terms.



2 Blip.tv technically doesn't allow game footage, but they turn a blind eye. Great for very long, uninterrupted coverage. Annoyingly long ads, but with the option to get a 50/50 cut to ease the pain.



3 Wgame.com is a dedicated host for games coverage, so it's good for building an audience without the risk of deletion. It also has its own free recording software if you don't already have a copy of Fraps (www.fraps.com).

BONUS TIP

RETSUPURAE

Slowbeef and Diabetus are one of the best MST3K-like game commentary teams on the web (bit.ly/y40Pe).



The Hard Stuff

GET THE PC YOUR GAME RESERVE

TESTED

A8-3850

AMD

The A8-3850 processor is the culmination of AMD's long-simmering Fusion architecture. AMD blended a quad-core CPU build (similar to existing Phenom offerings) and poured in some Radeon GPU goodness to create what the company calls an APU (Advanced Processing Unit). The integrated GPU is the most ambitious graphics core built onto a CPU chip yet, stuffing a full-on, low-end DX11 graphics engine onto the processor. AMD's hoping the more advanced GPU inside the A8-3850 will make up for the somewhat anemic performance of their traditional CPU cores.

Unfortunately, AMD's also breaking with tradition in a not-so-good way: the APU procs require a completely new socket (dubbed FM1), so if you want one, get ready for a forced mobo upgrade. Along with the new CPU, AMD's shipping an updated Southbridge chip (a

It requires a completely new socket, so get ready for a mobo upgrade.

mobo's Southbridge controls areas such as USB and the BIOS), dubbed the Fusion Controller Hub (or FCH). The higher-end A75 version of the FCH is the first PC core logic to implement USB 3.0 and SATA 6Gbps on a single chip. Pretty cool.

But it's the A8 that's the most interesting: the CPU itself consists of four traditional Phenom-style cores running at 2.9GHz. The graphics engine built onto the A8-3850 runs in parallel with all those cores. The integrated GPU consists of 400

shader cores running at 600MHz plus 20 texture units. Sadly though, compared to the Radeon HD 6770 (which got a not-so-hot 68% last issue), this is half the number of shader cores and a 250MHz lower clock. Ouch.

It's a Radeon, the driver says so!

AMD calls the A8's GPU a Radeon HD 6550D, but don't be fooled by the naming scheme: it's not directly comparable to a standard Radeon videocard due to the need to share memory with the CPU. And when memory sharing by two ordinarily separate parts is required, you're probably gonna see a performance hit in both components—which was unfortunately verified in my tests. In fact, I couldn't get the *Shogun 2* benchmark to finish at all running at 1920x1080. The numbers in *DiRT 3* and *Metro 2033* were OK for low-end hardware, but certainly not jaw-dropping.

However, if 14fps in *Metro 2033* at low detail isn't exactly awesome sounding, you can always add an entry-level graphics card for \$120 or less, such as the Radeon HD 6670. The two GPUs then take advantage of AMD's CrossFireX technology,

improving framerates, and allowing you to bump up the eye-candy. In fact, when you install a second low-end graphics card, AMD's Catalyst software sees the pair as a single Radeon HD GPU. The HD 6670 plus the integrated GPU becomes the Radeon HD 6690D2, for example. Of course, not all games take advantage of CrossFireX, but most current-generation games will see a performance boost that's almost doubled.

AMD's new APU won't turn entry-level PCs into gaming powerhouses. The CPU part of the A8 is the same lackluster Phenom II-style core, and its performance can't touch Intel's Sandy Bridge CPUs. But folks gunning for APU-based PCs, with a few sacrifices in detail levels, will be able to play cutting-edge games with decent framerates, even at mid-range resolutions of 1680x1050. At just over 130 bucks, that ain't half bad. ■ **Loyd Case**

\$135 ◆ www.amd.com ◆ Entry

VERDICT

The CPU itself is rather unimpressive, but its on-die GPU runs most games at 1680x1050 with playable framerates, and for a very affordable \$135.

PC GAMER
75



The new APU procs still have those fragile-as-hell pins. Be extra-careful handling!

BENCHMARKS 3DMark Vantage Performance 3,679 ◆ 3DMark 2011 Performance 1,025 ◆ *STALKER: CoP* 20/22fps ◆ *Shogun 2: Total War* DNR/25fps ◆ *DiRT 2* 30/33fps ◆ *Metro 2033* 13/14fps ◆ Games run at 1920x1080/1680x1050, med. detail

TESTED

Q&A

Missing in action

Q: A strange error message pops up when I try to boot my PC. It says: "Missing operating system" during POST. I tried rebooting in Safe Mode, but the same thing happens. I also tried reseating the SATA cables and power cables on the back of my hard drive and on the motherboard, but that didn't work either. I even went into my BIOS and reset everything to factory defaults. Still nothing. I'm running Windows 7, and I've had the PC for a few years and it ran fine until now.

Saddened in Saint Louis

A: Checking your power and SATA cables—as you did—is the best place to start. It's also a good idea to disconnect the cables completely and then re-connect them. If that doesn't fix anything, the suspect is typically a dead CMOS (Complementary Metal-Oxide Semiconductor) battery. It's that little, circular, silver-ish battery that rests on your motherboard and stores your BIOS's data (such as where to locate your OS's boot drive). First, make sure



Dead CMOS batteries make fantastic counters for Magic: The Gathering.

your PC is turned off and the main AC power cable is disconnected from your PSU. Next, open the case and pop the battery out of the chipset using your fingers (if you can't find the battery, refer to your mobo's manual). If it's stuck, gently nudging a small, flat-headed screwdriver between the battery and its plastic cradle should get it out. After it's free, check the top surface of the battery for its voltage, and then replace it with a battery of identical voltage. (You can buy a variety of CMOS batteries on Amazon for five bucks, or swap out an identical one from an unused mobo.) If this still doesn't correct the error, it's likely a corrupted OS, and you'll need to reformat using your Win 7 disc. **CC**

Fragpedal Quad

Good Work Systems

For something that costs a whopping \$80, the Fragpedal Quad reeks of cheap production: from the partially exposed printed circuit boards to the gaudy, shimmering stickers adorning the cable connectors. These dual two-button foot pedals are designed to up your skills by getting your feet in on the action, letting you program macros into each pedal to add an extra layer of advantage to your favorite games. But these awkward peripherals are way more hindrance than help.

After deciding that the included filmed-in-Windows-98 tutorial wasn't doing me any good, I put the Fragpedals through their paces with a marathon round of *Team Fortress 2*. Conveniently, the Fragpedal Quad comes equipped with appropriate key bindings for many of the latest games, including *TF2*, *Crysis 2*, and *StarCraft II*. When it came to actual gameplay, however, the Fragpedals didn't fare so well. It was pretty fun tapping my right foot for some double-jumping Scout action, but trying to implement four new buttons using two previously-unused limbs is a real struggle for the brain when the action gets frantic. Frustratingly, the pedals would often interfere with keyboard presses, and if I jiggled my leg, I'd accidentally activate a pedal button even if it was fully pushed down. I also felt incredibly off-balance while using them, like I was playing the "floor is lava" game while trying to get kills on Dustbowl. The pedals also make a loud *clack* when pressed—if you've got roommates, this'll drive them insane.

It's not all bad—this device will be a great boon for disabled gamers who can't make full use of their hands, and the Fragpedals are plug-and-play with no drivers needed. But if you've been using a keyboard up until now, just stick with what you've got. **Lucas Sullivan**

Step 1: Use feet in FPS games.
Step 2: ???
Step 3: Profit



\$80, www.gamingmouse.com ♦ Category: Mid

Hard Stuff Trinity

DREAM SYSTEM	MID-RANGE	ENTRY LEVEL
CASE AND PSU Thermaltake Level 10; Antec HCP1,200W PSU \$1,150	CASE AND PSU Corsair 800D; Corsair TX 750W PSU \$395	CASE AND PSU NZXT Phantom; Corsair 500W PSU \$210
PROCESSOR Intel Core i7-990X Extreme 3.46GHz \$1,000	PROCESSOR Intel Core i7-2600K Sandy Bridge 3.4GHz \$315	PROCESSOR Intel Core i3-2100 Sandy Bridge 3.1GHz \$125
MOTHERBOARD Asus Rampage III Extreme LGA1366 \$380	MOTHERBOARD Asus P8P67 Deluxe LGA1155 \$230	MOTHERBOARD Gigabyte GA-P61- USB3-B3 LGA1155 \$90
MEMORY 12GB Corsair Dominator DDR3-1600 RAM \$160	MEMORY 8GB Patriot Gamer 2 Series DDR3-1600 \$100	MEMORY 4GB Corsair XMS3 DDR3-1333 RAM \$46
OPTICAL DRIVE Samsung SHB123L Blu-ray \$65	OPTICAL DRIVE Samsung Black SH-S223L LightScribe \$20	OPTICAL DRIVE Sony DDU1681S \$17
HARD DRIVE OCZ Vertex 2 100GB SSD; WD Caviar 2TB \$280	HARD DRIVE Seagate Barracuda 1.5TB \$70	HARD DRIVE WD Caviar Blue 500GB \$40
SOUNDCARD Creative X-Fi Sound Blaster Titanium HD \$164	SOUNDCARD Creative X-Fi Sound Blaster Titanium \$87	SOUNDCARD Onboard \$0
VIDEOCARD Nvidia GeForce GTX 580 (x2) \$1,000	VIDEOCARD Asus ENGTX560 GeForce GTX 560 Ti \$265	VIDEOCARD EVGA GeForce GTX 550 Ti \$150
TOTAL PRICE \$4,200	TOTAL PRICE \$1,482	TOTAL PRICE \$678

Mighty mice

Four new tools for fragging your foes! **by Jonathan Cooper**

G400

Logitech

While the G400 offers what PC gamers have come to expect, it falls short of delivering what hardcore gamers require (despite being called a gamer's mouse by Logitech). For instance, the two programmable side buttons are technically adequate, but in this case four would've been better considering that the DPI buttons (located above and below the mouse wheel) are awkwardly positioned. They're functional for changing the DPI levels between play sessions (it supports from 400 to 3600), but taking my hand off the mouse to change sensitivity in a *Team Fortress 2* match was enough delay for me to eat a fatal rocket.

Despite having the look of a cutting-edge gaming mouse, it doesn't have the feel of one. I kept reaching for buttons that weren't there, and it's just not as comfy as the competition. It's durable, but with extended use it seems more like the utilitarian mice that came with Gateway PCs in the '90s—rubber cord and all—than one built for shooting folks in the face. It's OK for casual gaming, but for someone looking for an ultra-competitive gaming mouse—one that won't get you accidentally killed in *Counter-Strike*—save up the extra \$15 and go for the Thermaltake Black Element (reviewed to your right). ■

\$50 ♦ www.logitech.com ♦ Category: Mid

PC GAMER
70



XAI Pro

Steel Series

The XAI is like a gorgeous Ferrari with a giant, distracting dent in its hood. No matter how savory the paint job, or how amazing it handles, I'm never, ever going to be able to ignore that dent. And the XAI certainly is beautiful in its own quaint way. It's stylishly simplistic, and made of a sleek, comfortable plastic that's smooth to the touch. Beneath its old-fashioned exterior lies all of the necessities, including multiple profile settings that can be browsed using an LED screen located underneath the mouse—an awesome feature that takes full advantage of its built-in memory, making it easy to set up for LANs.

But then there's that dent. I figure most people grip their computer mouse in a similar way: thumb resting on the left side, pointer and middle fingers on the left and right buttons respectively, and ring and pinky landing somewhere on the right side. When I used the XAI in this way, the same way I'd used every mouse for over 15 years, my pointer finger sat on an extremely sensitive button. Quite often, I'd mistakenly click the button. It's a major, constant distraction, and it led me to disable the button entirely (dropping the number of truly usable buttons to seven). It's a shame; if not for that misstep, the XAI would be great. ■

\$90 ♦ www.steelseries.com ♦ Category: Mid

PC GAMER
68



Black Element

Thermaltake

As soon as the Black Element is plugged in, four areas begin to pulse red. This alone isn't all that sensational. But when I realized I had the ability to modify not just the glow's color, but to change which areas of the mouse light up and which ones don't? Now that's something I can get behind. More than just the aesthetic can be modified, though. Beneath the contoured, comfortable body lies a button to switch between different profiles, as well as a compartment that houses five 4.5g weights that I played around with until I had it feeling just right. Further customizing the Element by tweaking the DPI (it offers 100 to 6500) made it to feel like a natural extension of my arm.

Also, the ability to save macros to the 128k of internal memory is extremely helpful for an MMO/RTS fan such as myself. It means being able to have a button that does what normally takes two buttons to do, like selecting all units in *StarCraft II*, or activating an ability on the second bar in *World of Warcraft*. And because it's saved on internal memory, I can take it to a LAN without worrying about making new macros or settings—it's all on the mouse. Some of the side buttons are a little hard to hit, but at only \$65, it falls far below the premium most manufacturers charge—for an experience that's not far off from mice double that price. ■

PC GAMER
85

\$65 ♦ www.usa.ttesports.com ♦ Category: Mid

Mamba 4G

Razer

PC GAMER
EDITOR'S
CHOICE
★★★★★

I've always imagined that changing the batteries in a wireless mouse would be like putting quarters into an arcade machine. Beyond the obvious expenditure similarities, the fear of fumbling to slap two AAs into my mouse as my on-screen avatar gets butchered brought back vivid flashbacks of dropping quarters on the floor as the "CONTINUE?" countdown flashed mockingly at me. Razer's Mamba 4G not only annihilates this fear, but does so while making every other mouse I've ever used feel utterly insufficient.

In terms of comfort, precision, and battery life, the Mamba 4G is at the top of its class. Its rechargeable internal battery put up impressive time while I used it to destroy baddies in *League of Legends*, lasting for several days of on-and-off play. Thanks to the ability to either recharge the chassis on the convenient, stylish dock or to use it as a wired mouse (the transformation takes only seconds), there was never any fear of the battery crapping out and leaving me helpless, either. Any trepidation about tracking delay was also put to rest immediately, and the 1ms response rate, 6400 DPI, and 4G dual-sensor system are all so precise, wired or wireless, that it made nailing headshots easier than ever—I felt like my twitch-combat skills had been given a shot in the arm. Make no mistake, if you've already got the FPS skills, the Mamba will boost them noticeably. It's painfully pricey, ringing up at 130 bucks, but still: the Mamba is one of the best mice out there, so you get what you pay for. ■

PC GAMER
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\$130 ♦ www.razerzone.com ♦ Category: Dream

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PC Gamer magazine is published by Future US, Inc.

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"All the News
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The Daily Blink

Today's Horoscope
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today. They may not have your
interests at heart.



August 8th, 2011

by Chris Hanel and Michael Owen

1200 Microsoft Points

RIFTCON to compete with BlizzCon

The battle between *World of Warcraft* and MMO newcomer *RIFT* spilled into the arena of live events with the announcement of Trion's brand-new convention RIFTCON; opening to the public simultaneously and across the street from BlizzCon 2011.

"You know, I poked my head in, and it looks rather similar to BlizzCon," said one *WoW* player. "I'm definitely going to check it out some more." The announcement has led to an arms race of sorts between the two companies, both attempting to attract a larger audience.

The attractions of both events continue to proliferate. Trion's promise that RIFTCON visitors would receive "twice the swag" led to Blizzard increasing the amount of game-themed items available at its convention. From there, Trion upped the ante by offering their con-goers an opportunity to meet several in-game



characters as portrayed by actors. Blizzard came back by holding a press conference with VP Chris Metzen wearing a costume of the character he voices, Thrall, that was rumored to cost \$700,000 and weigh 300 pounds.

The following week, Trion's Item Design and Experimental Extradimensional Science department informed the community that they would be "Breaching the very barriers between worlds," and attempting to open their own dimensional rift over Anaheim on the final day of their event using "Forbidden and arcane research." As of this printing, Blizzard Entertainment was in a high-level meeting reportedly discussing the viability of genetically engineering and cloning flying,

sparkly ponies to hand out to the crowd at the closing concert. *PC Gamer* will continue to provide updates as the situation develops.

Nukem in alleged 'decency scandal' Settles for undisclosed sum

Videogame icon Duke Nukem is in hot water today after public sightings wining and dining an anonymous female beauty at a swank New York restaurant, and shocking fellow diners by pulling out chairs, holding open doors, and extinguishing his cigar at the dinner table.

Developer Gearbox Software is said to be considering litigation, citing the ungentlemanly conduct clause in Duke's contract. "We're very concerned; these rumors of civilized and well-mannered behavior need to be investigated so the company can protect its investments," said a representative for the company.

Nukem could not be reached for comment, but his publicist released the following statement: "Duke is, always has been, and always will be, the face of all that is tasteless and ridiculous, and no court proceedings are going to change that. Duke would like to assure all his fans that he will wait a minimum of two weeks to return any subsequent phone calls from his date."

NEWSLINE

Steam Raises Prices to \$10,000 a Title

■ Gamers: "Steam is Great!" "I bought 19!" "Best Sale Yet!" **Business**

Day[9] Tests Positive for Red Bull

■ Tournaments unable to ban due to it not being a foreign substance **Health**

Minecraft Player Hospitalized After Constructing Plato's Allegory of the Cave

■ Enlightenment, nervous breakdown suspected. Notch: "Sounds like a great feature." **Living**

SWTOR: Troopers Will Gain XP 'Canonically'



A developer Q&A revealed today that *TOR*'s Trooper Class would stay true to the *Star Wars* universe and only progress through levels by missing their targets wildly.

"Whether it be a nearby bulkhead, large tree, or even an innocent bystander, you'll have plenty of ways to improve your highly proficient inaccuracy," one BioWare employee promised in a forum post. Players will customize their weapons to change how often and

how wildly they miss, and even have a special stat category for managing to hit the worst possible target in the room, such as sleeping rancors or your own superior officer.

As to whether there would be penalties for actually striking or killing your opponent, devs wasted no time in explaining that "such a mechanic will not be included in *TOR* for fear of straying too far away from the source material."

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